Neven Iliev

Morningwood

EVERYBODY LOVES LARGE CHESTS

vol.1

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Everybody Loves Large Chests
Volume One: Morningwood

A book by Neven Iliev

Prologue

A young man, closer to a boy than an adult, wandered down the dark tunnel. His boots scraped against the damp stone floor, echoing slightly throughout the passage. The lantern he was holding did its best to illuminate the cave-like walls, his shadow dancing ominously behind him. He had spent the better part of two hours in these tunnels, the so called Green Zone of the Litigar Dungeon Complex. So far he'd been lucky. With only a few bats and giant rats as his opponents, he was steadily on his way to Level 5!

Just a little more and I can graduate from this 'newbie area' and move onto bigger and better things!

He picked up the pace after psyching himself up. The mere thought of leaving this gloomy place and finishing his dull Quest was all the motivation he needed right now. Breaking into a light jog, he went deeper and deeper into the winding maze-like cave system.

Left, then right, then right, then left again - wait, or was that a triple right?

Himmel stopped at a three-way intersection and looked around. It didn't take him long to realize he had gotten completely lost. He shone his lantern's light down the left tunnel, then the right one.

Yep. No idea. Oh well, this is why they tell us to carry Portal Keys! I'm sure it will work out!

The small, rune-inscribed stone would whisk him away to safety in an instant should the need arise. Although the usefulness of such a thing could not be understated, the complacency and carelessness it taught young adventurers was less than useful.

Continuing down the right-hand path, the boy noticed a change in his surroundings. The uneven floor suddenly became flat. Although it was still bare rock, it felt like walking on polished marble rather than inside a cave. Peering into the darkness, he noticed something clearly out of place. Something brown and strangely rectangular.

A chest! Lucky!

A simple wooden box with no lock. The dungeon randomly spewed these out, sometimes containing useful items and gear that could be a veritable

jackpot for an enterprising young adventurer. Not this one, though - the wooden chests in this dungeon offered the lowest grade of loot. Most of them contained bottom-tier potions or maybe moldy bread. The best he could hope to get out of this would be an Iron Ring that provided a negligible bonus to a random stat.

Still, a newbie could not afford to pass up pennies on the ground. The adventurer approached the chest with a small spring in his step. He opened it with both arms and peered at it expectantly. However, what awaited him inside was neither a potion nor a piece of inedible bread. It was something much more impressive than that!

Several sets of dagger-like teeth and a giant red tongue became visible as the monster disguised as a chest revealed its true nature. The fleshy tongue coiled around the young adventurer's waist and dragged him into the gaping maw before he could react. He was then unceremoniously eaten in three big bites.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 2 Mimic! All attributes +2.]

Chapter One
Death Comes In Many Forms

Part One

After enjoying its first meal, the Mimic let out a small burp and went back to pretending to be a treasure chest. It had spent the first five days of its life in this very spot, patiently waiting for a chance. Having fulfilled its purpose, it simply continued to sit there, slowly digesting its victim.

Mimics were very good at imitating chests. Sight alone was insufficient to determine if this monster was the genuine article or not. After all, it looked exactly like a wooden box that was eighty centimeters long, thirty-five centimeters tall and forty centimeters on its side. Its ‘skin’ was a light oak-like faux-wood, with imitation steel reinforcing its corners and a half-cylinder lid that served as its upper jaw.

However, it could not keep calm like before. Although sightless, it could still perceive everything in a ten meter radius around it through magic. And what it ‘saw’ left the simple monster with an odd sense of dissatisfaction. Its flat resting place was now a mess.

The torn clothing, discarded sword, still-lit lantern and several puddles of blood were a problem. Some part of it realized it would be bad to leave things as they were. Several dozen small, insect-like legs sprouted sideways from its bottom and lifted it a few centimeters off the ground. It then opened its mouth and let its huge red tongue fall out. It spent the next several minutes scuttling around the place, determined to erase any and all evidence that someone had died there.

The blood was lapped up and the scraps of fabric simply stuck to the wet tongue. The fleshy tendril-like organ coiled itself around the lantern before swallowing it whole. When it attempted to pick up the iron sword in the same way, the Mimic tightened its tongue a little too much around the blade and cut itself.

“HISSSS!” it exclaimed at the unexpected jolt of pain. It reflexively let go of the sword, which fell to the floor along with several drops of sticky yellow blood.

[You have suffered a shallow cut. HP -4.]

Another strange window popped up into its consciousness. Although it somehow understood the words, it lacked the brain capacity to process their

meaning. Not that it had any intention of doing so right now. The sword was still a problem that needed to be dealt with.

It approached the inanimate weapon warily, carefully observing it. It was a normal iron sword - completely mundane and entirely unmagical in every way conceivable. As expected of a beginner's equipment. Not that a Level 2 monster had any idea what it actually was.

The Mimic recalled the way its breakfast had struggled a little while ago. The adventurer was holding onto the strange object without hurting himself. His fingers were wrapped around it, much like how the Mimic attempted to do. The only difference was that the Mimic had grabbed the pointy end by mistake.

Realizing its blunder, the monster warily stretched out its tongue again. However, the fleshy organ was a bit too thick to properly grip onto the short handle. The creature briefly considered this fact before simply warping its wide tongue into a more tentacle-like shape. Mimics were, technically speaking, a species of shapeshifter. Granted, they were not as good at it as other monsters. Something like warping their tongue or sprouting small legs to move around was the extent of their ability.

Now that its tongue was in the proper shape, the animated chest wrapped it around the handle of the sword. It picked it up safely and held it above itself. Its numerous legs moved in unison, rocking the chest-like body left and right like it was doing a little triumphant dance!

[The Intelligence (INT) Attribute has been created through a special action. INT +1.]

Another mysterious window. It completely ruined the mood, causing the Mimic to stop its little celebration. Still, it now vaguely understood the thing it was holding onto was a weapon. It moved it around by using its tongue in lieu of an arm. Brimming with curiosity, it swung the sword downwards onto the floor.

CLANNNNG

The blade slammed into the stone floor, letting out a clear bell-like sound that echoed through the cave. There was a tiny crack in the floor, which didn't escape the Mimic's notice.

"Hm? Did you hear that?"

The distant voice made the Mimic freeze. It had gotten carried away with its new toy and attracted attention.

“Yeah, I definitely heard something. Come on, let’s go check it out!”

Another voice followed. Although it didn’t understand the words, the Mimic clearly recognized they were moving closer to its location. It quickly retreated back to its spot and sat down. However, there was a serious problem - it was still holding the sword with its tongue. It had serious doubts whether it should try to eat it and there was nothing around that could be used as a hiding place. Not sure of how much time it had, the Mimic did the only thing its tiny mind could think of.

Part Two

Two sets of footsteps approached from one of the tunnels. The Mimic followed its instincts and stood perfectly still, lying in wait. A man and a woman entered its perception range. The blond man was holding a sword and a lantern, wearing similar clothes to the monster's first victim. The brown-haired woman wore a plain white robe and held a wooden staff with one hand.

"Oh! A chest!" the man exclaimed.

He approached the Mimic with a rather carefree gait.

"Hold on Ron! It could be a trap!"

The woman grabbed onto her companion's collar while warning him of danger.

"A trap? Come on, Gloria! It's a box! What's the worst that could happen?"

"The rumors said something about Mimics appearing in this dungeon recently. Monsters that look like chests! You can't be careless!"

"Wait, this place is supposed to have only bats and rats, right? How come there's Mimics all of a sudden?"

"I don't know, but shouldn't we be careful? Our lives are on the line you know!"

Gloria's green eyes darted between her brother and the chest. While new types of monsters appearing in a dungeon was not unheard of, it was still quite rare. The cause of such changes was unconfirmed, although the likely culprit was the appearance of a new Dungeon Master.

"Alright, sis. Tell you what. Your big brother's going to stab the big mean box just to be sure, okay?" Ron reassuringly patted Gloria's head.

"Mmwu! Don't patronize me like that! We're not kids anymore!"

"Fine, fine! I was just kidding, sheesh…"

The Mimic had no idea what was going on right now. Its new prey had shown up and stood idly by instead of going straight for the 'prize' like the

first one. It heard the voices and saw the faces, but understanding what these people were saying and doing was impossible.

Then the slightly plumper one started approaching again. However, this time something was off. The man was holding a sword - something the Mimic already recognized as dangerous. And this sword was not hanging idly by the adventurer's side, but was held squarely in front. The Mimic instinctively understood that its prey had grown suspicious. And suspicion was a shapeshifter's worst enemy.

Ron approached closer and closer. Once he got within striking distance of the chest, he slowly lifted his sword arm up in preparation to slash at the wooden box. Worst case scenario, he blunted the blade a bit. Best case scenario, he avoided a deadly trap. Even if a fight broke out, he was confident his swordplay could handle the weaklings in this cave.

The Mimic, on the other hand, had extremely limited knowledge of swordfighting. It knew exactly two things about the subject - 'the pointy bit hurts' and 'swinging it downward can break rocks.' Both of those tidbits made it realize just what was about to happen. It felt cornered. And like any cornered beast, it lashed out.

Just as Ron was about to perform an overhead strike, the wooden chest before him sprang open! And amidst the rows of serrated white teeth and the undulating fleshy tongue, there was a flash of something shiny, followed by a piercing pain in his abdomen.

"Urk! UGAAAH!" he screamed at the top of his lungs. The Mimic had stabbed him clear through the stomach.

The Mimic was a monster that survived on deception. It instinctively knew leaving evidence behind was bad, that it had to appear as unassuming and unspoiled as possible. But eating this weapon was dangerous, possibly lethal. So with nowhere else to put it, the monster ended up hiding it in its mouth cavity while gripping onto the handle with the tip of its tongue.

And now, those trustworthy instincts caused it to lash out and land a devastating blow on its unsuspecting victim.

[The Strength (STR) Attribute has been created through a special action. STR +1.]

[The Wisdom (WIS) Attribute has been created through a special action.

WIS +1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Sword Mastery is now Level 1. STR +2. DEX +2.]

“Ron!” shouted Gloria. “Hold on!”

She gripped the wooden staff with a determined expression and mumbled something under her breath. As she completed her incantation her hands glowed with a soft light.

“Quick Heal!”

After uttering the command word, the light shot out towards her brother, enveloping him. However, it was not enough. Even if a low-leveled Priestess like her could not mend that sort of injury with one cast, she could still buy time to get off another Quick Heal.

“KAH! KOFF!” Ron sputtered out blood. He felt reinvigorated by his sister’s healing magic that restored a sizable chunk of his rapidly depleting vitality. He used that bit of strength to swing his sword arm downward, but couldn’t put any real power behind the blow. With just gravity to assist it, his sword simply bounced off the Mimic’s solid teeth with a small clanking sound.

[You suffered a minor scratch. HP -1.]

Having been attacked, the Mimic broke out of the stupor it had been in. It knew about swords now. The knowledge that flooded into it from the Skill was almost too much for its tiny mind to bear, so it took a while for the monster to adapt to it.

“Quick Heal!” came a shout from the side.

Its enemy had regained a bit of strength again and was about to attempt another strike. However, the Mimic already had him in checkmate. It pulled on the sword with a bit of dexterity and - instead of sliding it out of its fleshy sheath, it dragged its victim into the Mimic’s waiting maw.

CRUNCH

“NOOOO! ROOON!” shrieked Gloria, her voice echoing in every direction of the dark passage.

CRUNCH MUNCH

Her dearest older brother, that goofy but reliable guy, was now being eaten right in front of her. Blood and guts gushed out all over the place as his thrashing feet went limp.

“YOU! YOUUUU!” she screamed. She was outraged. That much was obvious. However, she was a newbie Priestess and her offensive magic was practically non-existent. If her opponent was one of the undead, then she might be able to do something. Against this particular monster though, she was helpless. Not that her mind could process that right now.

“I’LL KILL YOU! PIECE OF SHIT!”

She was too busy screaming in grief and anger to do anything else.

The Mimic stopped chewing once it made sure its prey was good and dead. It spat the mangled corpse back out and readied its sword. The tiny legs at the bottom reappeared and it scuttled quickly towards the shrieking woman.

“Ah… AAAAH!”

It was over. Gloria had realized her folly entirely too late. She stared in abject horror as the mass of teeth and flesh in front of her swung a bloodied weapon around. She somehow mustered enough strength to turn and run away, but was too slow. The Mimic pierced through her chest from behind.

“GUAHH! BLERG! No! NO! I don’t- Please- Argh!”

She struggled weakly, desperately begging for salvation. Such a thing wouldn’t come, though. All that awaited her was despair and a large number of sharp teeth.

CRUNCH

[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 4 Mimic! All attributes +4.]
[Proficiency level increased. Sword Mastery is now Level 2. STR +2. DEX +2.]

There it was again, that weird window. And now that the Mimic had its Intelligence (INT) and Wisdom (WIS) reach 5, it was finally able to understand. The window was telling the monster it had grown stronger.

CRUNCH MUNCH MUNCH

That was the extent of this revelation though. Objectively speaking, this individual was already a genius compared to your average Mimic, but in the end, that didn't amount to much. Even now it was way too busy eating the remains of its latest victims to care about such things.

After swallowing up the woman, licking up any spillage on the floor and crushing her wooden staff in its teeth, it went back to the mangled male corpse and repeated the process.

A few minutes later, the grizzly scene was completely erased. All that could be seen in that oddly flat section of the dungeon tunnel was a simple wooden chest with the tip of an iron blade poking out from behind it.

Part Three

The giant rat's head splattered against the rocky ground. Bits of brain and skull flew everywhere, staining the floors and walls of the 'Green Zone' tunnel. Bogon grimaced at the pointless mess he had just made. Lifting his left foot, the short, muscular dwarf shook it a few times in a futile attempt to shake off the filth. He gave up and settled for scraping off the remains of the former rat from the sole of his armored boot.

He sighed dejectedly. Even if he could kill the monsters by simply stepping on them, they were still a nuisance. After all, no matter how weak an opponent, washing off the blood and guts from his metal greaves took the same amount of time and effort. The same could be said for the rest of his full-plate steel armor, but at least the small creatures in this weak dungeon were only tall enough to stain his lower half.

Bogon turned his head towards his human companion.

"Look, Val, Ah'm tellin' ye this job's a waste of our time!" he complained for the umpteenth time.

"You're free to fuck off at any time, Bogon. You're the one who insisted on following me here," she retorted. The black-haired, black-eyed woman was too busy inspecting the remains of five giant rats around them to pay attention to his whining. "Besides," she continued, "it's not a waste if I can find the cause of all these disappearances."

"I'll give ye the cause! Bloody greenhorns dunno what teh fook they're doin' in here! They get full a' themselves and end up in some rat's belleh!"

"It's not that simple. The mayor said they've lost more people in here in the last two months than they have in the last two years combined," she answered without averting her gaze. "Something must've snuck in here. Something besides the sudden influx of Mimics. If I find it, it'll do wonders for my- Ah, I mean, I want to do my part in helping the newbies grow!"

Her eyes shone dangerously for a second before she tried to change her words. Bogon sighed again. That woman's eccentricities were always grinding his gears. If she wasn't a promising spellcaster he never would've even bothered with her.

But she was. And he needed her help for his next Quest. He had hoped to dissuade her at first, but that hope was now rapidly deteriorating. After all, he just saw her true intentions shine through her facade. She obviously took this as more than a simple job.

Bogon suspected she was hiding something ever since they teamed up two weeks ago. He had a pretty good idea what that 'something' was - the musclebound dwarf was sharper than he looked. However, he also knew better than to poke his nose into this strange woman's personal business. A Necromancer wasn't someone you want as an enemy.

"How can ye be so sure it's not them Mimics that showed up recently?" he offered in desperation.

"The Mimics here are young so they're feeble," she explained. "Their HP is only about 20 or 30. One good hit from any offensive Job and they'll be at death's door. A Wizard or Rogue would probably one-shot them with a bit of luck."

Once word got out that Mimics started appearing here, the various adventurer guilds acted. They made a sincere effort to educate and caution their newcomers about the new threat. After some time, those monsters became less and less of a threat. In time, the threat was reduced to the point that they ended up more popular than the wooden chests they were attempting to imitate. People these days were honestly disheartened when the box they attacked turned out to be just regular wood. They needed to defeat monsters to raise their Job Levels, so an easy kill was way more welcome than a scrap of worthless loot.

Most of the newbies even stopped looting the disappointing boxes entirely. A chest would disappear into dust soon after its treasures had been pilfered, so leaving it like that was a sign to others not to waste their time and effort on it. It was a sort of unwritten rule among them.

In fact, one such example was in this very tunnel, right next to Bogon and Valeria. A simple, unassuming box, closer to a crate than a treasure chest, stood against a wall. The rounded wooden lid had been cracked and a long, straight dent was clearly visible on it. Someone had obviously already tested it with an axe or sword.

Valeria, having finished her inspection, stood up and turned to her annoyed companion.

“These numbers go far beyond simple carelessness. At least forty-five people have gone missing recently, most of them reportedly seen heading towards this area. Whatever’s doing this is right here, and I’m going to find it! I’ll be fine on my own once I get my familiars ready, so can you seriously fuck off, now?”

“Haaaah. Fine Val,” said Bogon dejectedly. “Ye win. Ah’m goin’ back ter town. Hit me up once yer done, aight?”

“Pay’s good this time, right? I’m not working for peanuts again.”

“Ye’ll find out later,” said Bogon while pulling out a Portal Key.

He gripped the fist-sized stone firmly, causing it to break and crumble to white dust. The dust swirled around him for about a second before there was a flash of blue light. The armored dwarf Warrior was whisked back to the Waystone outside the dungeon’s entrance, leaving behind only a puff of white smoke.

“Finally!” spat Valeria. “What a jackass! Why’d he even come here if he was just going to complain?! Now I can do what I came here to do. Heh. Hehehe! Uhehk hehkk hehk hehk!”

Valeria grinned, a wide, crooked grin that sat wrongly on her lovely face. An unhinged gleam shone in her eyes as she cackled. Exhilaration filled her at the prospect of coming across a new type of low-leveled monster. To her, that was the most likely perpetrator of this disturbance. Probably something that lost its way and snuck in here looking for easy prey. Valeria could not wait to get her hands on it.

She cackled for a solid minute before she was able to calm down. Her face quickly adapted the ‘cool and collected’ facade she wore whenever people were around. She needed to be mindful of others. This was still a popular dungeon, so it was actually rather common to run into newbies who were still doing their first Quests. Valeria had been one of those same newbies less than a month ago, but she stuck to a completely different part of the labyrinthine cave system. It wouldn’t be a stretch to say that she got lucky.

She straightened out the black Apprentice Robe she was wearing. It was a low-cut, short-sleeved dress-like garment with a knee-length skirt. The edges of the skirt and the sleeves were decorated with black frills. Black leather

bootlets with slightly raised heels led into fishnet stockings that continued up her pale legs, all the way to the lacy underwear hidden beneath her skirt.

On the whole, this outfit was entirely mismatched with its name. It didn't look a single thing like the chaste robes one would expect a Priest would wear. That was because the 'Robe' in the item's name simply referred to its magic-boosting Attribute bonuses and effects, rather than the actual style of the garment. Truthfully speaking, the only thing that set Valeria apart from the prostitutes in the nearby town was the pointy wide-brimmed hat and the faint stench of rotting flesh.

"Status," she chanted. A series of windows appeared at the forefront of her consciousness. She quickly verified the information.

[General Information]
Valeria Vortena
Human, Female, 21 years old
Member of the Order of the Black Wand
Level 16.35 Necromancer
Level 4.98 Monster Tamer
178/178 HP (+0.3/sec)
429/595 MP (+1.1/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 21, DEX 10, AGI 10, END 33, INT 119, WIS 119, MNT 43, FTH -68, CHR 34

[Necromancer Skills]
Necromancy - Lvl 5.43
Hexcraft - Lvl 4.23
Forbidden Power - Lvl 2.26
[Monster Tamer Skills]
Monster Domination - Lvl 2.97
[Other Skills]
Taboo - Lvl 4.34
Meditation - Lvl 3.45
Staff Mastery - Lvl 1.09
Wand Mastery - Lvl 2.30

A Necromancer with an overall Level of 20. In a place where the average monster was lucky to reach Level 3, she was unstoppable. Even with her

pitiful physical attributes she could still easily punch anything in here to death.

This much was natural - both Jobs and Skills would provide an Attribute boost every time they went up in Level. Training and raising these was the best way of raising combat power, although not the only one. It was also possible to train one's body and/or mind to increase specific Attributes, but it was not common practice. In the time it took for a warrior to gain STR +1 through the 'special action' of physical training, he could just as easily have earned himself almost six times as much through Level Ups. The difference in efficiency was simply incomparable.

However, anyone who looked at this Status Screen without knowing Valeria would be left scratching their head.

To begin with, Monster Tamer was an odd choice of secondary Job for a Necromancer. The latter was famous for using waves of disposable undead, while the former revolved around painstakingly raising a small number of powerful pet monsters. There were merits and demerits to either approach, but they both amounted to the same thing - having something else fight one's battles. Logically speaking, an adventurer would pick a secondary Job that either synergized with their main one or made them more versatile. Common sense dictated that this particular setup was a very poor one.

The truth was that Valeria did, in fact, make a logical choice, albeit for very different reasons. The Necromancer Job, while well suited to solo adventurers, also caused side-effects like negative Faith (FTH) and a high proficiency level of Taboo. This ostracized these adventurers from most religious societies, which meant they would end up shunned and despised by almost every single Priest, Monk and Paladin. Even the paganistic Shamans and Druids would avoid contact with these self-proclaimed Lords of the Dead. And something all these callings had in common was that they were healers - Jobs that could instantly mend wounds and restore vitality through their magic. This meant that a Necromancer never had a healer with them, which meant that the vast majority of other adventurers avoided them on principle. After all, nobody in their right mind was willing to risk their lives on grueling Quests without the safety net of healing magic.

In a way, Necromancers were almost always forced down the road of solitude. But that was perfect for them. Their desires were almost entirely

selfish anyway, not to mention the questionable and unethical rituals they would sometimes perform were bound to shock and disgust others. In a way, the Necromancer Job was perfect for Valeria as a person. The Monster Tamer Job, on the other hand, was perfect for her secret hobby. After all, it was a simple fact that living monsters could do things that the rotting undead were ill-equipped to handle.

“Maybe the cause is a random cave troll that wandered in?” Valeria shuddered at the possibilities. Her facade was quickly breaking down again. ”Huhuehehehe! Or maybe a werewolf? Either one of those would be perrrrfect!”

In truth, there were several ways of being saddled with negative FTH and Taboo. To Valeria, her Necromancer Job was an excellent way of explaining her Status to people with a high-level Appraisal Skill. If questioned, she could simply put on a ‘can’t be helped’ sort of attitude and blow it over. In some ways, she was extremely fortunate the acts she committed did not put something truly damning on her Status Screen. Something like, for example, a Monster Breeder Skill.

Valeria desperately needed a new toy. Her last pet, a Level 7 Gray Wolf, could not keep up with her demands and had simply expired. It was a good ride, so his owner found it a pity when the beast’s life ran out from all the abuse. Just remembering those long nights was enough to drive her wet.

“MMmmnn…”

She moaned softly. It had been too long since the last session. She leaned absentmindedly against a wall and sheepishly snuck a few fingers into her damp panties. Two digits pressed against her sodden entrance, her lower lips quivering slightly in anticipation. She was in the middle of a dark dungeon where anyone could walk in on her. The excitement egged her on until she could no longer stand it. Her highly immoral fantasies ran wild. And just as she was imagining being penetrated, her dreams became reality.

[Critical damage sustained. HP -145.]
[The overwhelming force of the blow has left you stunned for 5 seconds.]

A sword had punctured through the nape of her neck. The sudden thrust had driven the blade completely through her throat, leaving the bloodied tip poking out from underneath her chin.

[You are bleeding heavily from an open wound. HP -10.]

The entirely unremarkable and wholly non-magical lump of iron was pulled out of her, leaving a large vertical slit on her bloodied neck. She collapsed like a puppet with her strings cut and fell to the floor with a thud.

[You are bleeding heavily from an open wound. HP -10.]

“Kuh! Kuhah! Koff!”

Valeria sputtered blood from her mouth when her head hit the ground. Her mind was still reeling from the effects of the Stun condition, unable to comprehend what was happening.

[You are bleeding heavily from an open wound. HP -10.]

“Keh… Ple-Kuh!” she coughed weakly, her blood splattering against the cold stone floor. She could not even muster a scream before darkness overtook her vision.

[You are bleeding heavily from an open wound. HP -10.]
[You are no longer stunned.]
[You died.]

Part Four

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 15 Mimic! All attributes +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Assassination is now Level 4. AGI +2. DEX +1. STR +1.]
[Proficiency level increased. Stealth is now Level 3. AGI +2. DEX +1. END +1.

“Hissyah ssah ssah ssah!” the Mimic let out as it did its traditional celebratory jig. The tiny legs moved its rectangular body rhythmically side to side and the fleshy tendril of a tongue waved the bloody sword around to some unheard tune. It had just managed to fell a high-level opponent in a single strike - truly an achievement worth celebrating!

Valeria did not find the culprit behind all those disappearances. It had found her.

Forty-two of the forty-five reported missing persons were done in by the same monster. In these last two months it had learned how to shift its appearance to match that of an already ‘checked’ chest. Its prey would either ignore it and move on, or get greedy and approach. In the latter case, they would be stabbed and eaten. In the former scenario, they would be hunted down, stabbed and eaten.

This simple creature had found several devious ways to deceive and ultimately devour its victims. Truthfully, the difference in Level meant that it could probably charge a group of four newbies and end their lives with no difficulty. However, such things went against its instincts. And those had never led it astray so far.

A few minutes ago, when two strange-looking people entered its kill zone, those instincts screamed at the Mimic, warning it that it was no match for either one of them. The short metal one felt particularly dangerous. So this would-be-chest did the only thing it could - it focused every fiber of its being into cowering and hiding.

But the troublesome dwarf left all on his own. The human lingered in the area and began acting strangely. She grew more and more distracted until she stopped and leaned against the wall, leaving the disguised Mimic in her blind spot. Realizing its chance, the monster acted without hesitation.

It crept toward her silently. The Mimic's Stealth Skill allowed it to suppress its presence and lessen the sounds it made when it moved, although it drained its Mana Points (MP) unless it stood perfectly still. The Agility (AGI) Attribute aided in this, as every point of AGI meant smoother and nimbler movements of one's body as a whole.

Once it had reached her defenseless back, it thrust a sword into an unarmored weak point - the back of her neck.

Strength (STR) allowed the Mimic to carry heavier loads and enhanced melee attacks, such as sword thrusts. Dexterity (DEX) on the other hand governed how nimbly one could handle weapons and provided a power boost to piercing and thrusting attacks. Landing an attack on a vital point meant it would be at least two times stronger than it normally would have been.

And last but not least, it was an attack from behind on an unsuspecting opponent. These conditions allowed the Mimic to trigger its Assassination Skill, which overlapped with all other effects, boosting the overall power of that single strike threefold.

The result was a devastating blow that exceeded 66% of Valeria's HP, forcing her into the Stunned abnormal state which robbed her of her wits. She then bled out the remainder of her HP on the ground, without the need for a follow up attack.

Truthfully, if the Mimic had access to a better weapon, its prey would have died without ever realizing she had been ambushed.

Feeling awfully proud of its mild accomplishment, the Mimic stopped its little dance and used its tongue to fling the sword it had been holding into the air. The bloodied blade spun around several times before falling down towards the monster's open maw. A swirling dark purple portal opened up between its dagger-like teeth. The weapon disappeared into it without making a sound. The Mimic closed the portal and its maw. Having lightened its load, the Mimic proceeded to the next order of business.

"Shashus!" it hissed. While it sounded only vaguely like 'Status,' some invisible force recognized the chant and brought up a series of windows to the forefront of the monster's consciousness.

[General Information]
Mimic (Lesser), Genderless, 2 months old
Level 15.02 Mimic (+)
246/246 HP (+0.4/sec)
105/170 MP (+0.3/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 41, DEX 44, AGI 34, END 41, INT 34, WIS 36

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 4.05
Storage - Lvl 2.32
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 2.56
Stealth - Lvl 3.00
Sword Mastery - Lvl 4.87

The creature felt elated when it saw the (+) sign visible next to the Mimic entry in the Job section. That signified one thing - that the monster could unlock another Restricted Skill! Something like this happened twice before. The first time was at Level 5 when it chose the Assassination Skill, which allowed the creature to dispatch even heavily armored adventurers with ease.

The second time was when the monster became a Level 10 Mimic, at which point it chose to unlock the Storage Skill. This gave the monster knowledge of how to open and sustain a small window into a pocket dimension. This limited space could be used to store any and all items that were small enough to fit through the portal. Accessing this Storage demanded the use of magic, but such a thing wasn't quite free. The Mimic's Mana Points (MP) were consumed every time it withdrew or deposited an item. And yes, this simple creature did indeed have things it wanted to keep safe.

Or rather, things it needed to keep out of sight. After all, it had to keep its lair clean and unassuming if it was to deceive people. And while arms and armor made out of chainmail, leather or wood were no match for its teeth, solid iron was beyond its limits. As a result, the monster's Storage was currently holding a collection of swords, axes, shields, helmets, greaves, bracers and other inedible equipment. It was, essentially, using an alternate dimension as an overqualified garbage bin.

It did try to eat a sword, though. Once. Such an act broke a few teeth and cut apart the insides of its maw, causing its Health Points (HP) to decrease. And HP was a vital thing. If it hit 0, the mimic would die. Just like the forty-two - no, make that forty-three people it had killed. The Mimic understood its maximum HP rose alongside its Endurance (END) and STR. If it wasn't such an idiot, it would probably notice that its maximum HP went up by 5 with each point of END and a further 1 for each point of STR. Similarly, maximum MP would rise by 5 per point of INT, while END and WIS would boost automatic recovery of HP and MP, respectively, at a rate of 0.1 HP/MP per 10 points of END/WIS.

As for the other Skills, they came about naturally. Sword Mastery was the first Skill the Mimic ever learned, almost by accident. Stealth came about naturally as the monster put its Assassination Skill to practical use. Those two were Common Skills that any Job could learn through practice, although whether they would be useful is another question entirely. Shapeshift, on the other hand, was something the Mimic was born with - a Natural Skill.

And now, 5 Levels after attaining Storage, it was time for another delicious Skill. To do that, it had to open another screen in its mind. And to do THAT it had to chant the command words. Fortunately for the speaking-impaired monster, it seemed that intent was more important than proper pronunciation when it came to these things.

"Shkish shish: Shishik!" it hissed again, spitting all over the place in the process. Even if it wasn't saying the words right, it still had to say them out loud. It had no idea why it had to do that, nor did it particularly care. It just accepted it as the way things were and moved on with its life.

[Skill List: Mimic]
[Unlocked Skills: Assassination, Storage]
[Available Skills: Natural Armor, Misdirection, Cadaver Absorption]
[You can unlock 1 additional Restricted Skill from this Job.]

Just like the last two times, it had a few choices to pick from. And just like at Level 10, some new options had appeared. Although it recognized which Skills were left over and which ones were new, the monster still decided to give everything in the list a once-over. Even though its mental-boosting Attributes had been steadily climbing, it still did not trust its own memory too much. It was also possible that something might have changed the last

time it was here. Any decisions made here seemed to be permanent, so it was important to be prudent.

[A special action has been performed. WIS +1.]

It took the Attribute increase as confirmation for its rather obvious deductions. After all, such leaps of logic were truly phenomenal for a Mimic, and this one knew full well it was a dumbass. Even if Intelligence (INT) improved its memory capacity and Wisdom (WIS) helped the creature put its limited knowledge to use, it still had very little to begin with. Saying it didn't have two brain cells to rub together would not be entirely untrue.

The monster focused its barely functional mind on the first Available Skill on the list. After a few seconds, a new window popped up into its mind.

[Natural Armor]
Monsters are known for their tough hides that can shrug off anything and everything.
Requirements: Level 5 Monster Job, END 10
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Reduces all incoming damage by 1% per Level of this Skill.
Provides an additional +2 END per Level of this Skill.

This Skill was available the first two times as well. While it did look useful in a pinch, it had some unpleasant strings attached. To Level up a Skill, the Mimic had to raise its Proficiency by putting that Skill to practical use. And the practical use of Natural Armor obviously involved getting hit. A lot.

That was not, however, how the simplistic Mimic understood things. It simply deduced this Skill would not help it ambush its opponents like Assassination and Sword Mastery, nor was it useful in maintaining its cover like Stealth and Storage. So it was promptly ignored for the third time in a row. The Mimic then moved onto the next Skill in the list.

[Misdirection]
Allows the Assassin to create a small noise at a target location.
Requirements: Assassination, Stealth, DEX 40
Type: Active, Area

Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 50 MP
Range: 15 Meters
[Effects]
Create a small noise with the purpose of attracting attention.
The MP cost, range and types of noises available improve with each Level of this Skill.

As expected, this Skill was not available before. Just like the previous one, the Mimic failed to see how it could be useful. In fact, wouldn't making a noise out of nowhere put its prey on high alert? Surely doing such a thing was going to cause more problems than solutions. It seemed to go completely against what the Mimic was trying to do in the first place.

Hmm? Strategy? What's that? Does it taste good?

The Mimic quickly dismissed this Skill and moved onto the next one.

[Cadaver Absorption]
Allows the Mimic to absorb residual knowledge and power from the remains of its prey.
Requirements: Level 15 Mimic, WIS 30, INT 30, Has devoured at least 30 of the same Species.
Type: Active, Corpse-targeted
Activation Time: 2 seconds
Cost: 150 MP
Range: 2 Meters
[Effects]
A portion of the target's Attributes, Skill Proficiency or Job Levels will be permanently added to the Mimic's Status. What is absorbed is random.
This Skill can fail. Success rate depends on the Level of this Skill and the strength of the LCK Attribute.
The amount of knowledge or power absorbed increases with each Level of the Shapeshift Skill.

The monster strained its tiny mind to comprehend the complexity of this Skill. Eventually it reached a simple conclusion - it was a Skill that allowed the Mimic to get stronger by eating things. It liked getting stronger and it was always eating things anyway. It certainly sounded good. At least, better than those other two trash-tier Skills.

Having made its choice, the Mimic let out a series of hisses and gurgles that were loosely interpreted as ‘Unlock Skill: Cadaver Absorption.’ A flash of light briefly enveloped the animate wooden chest, flooding it with the knowledge of how to use its new acquisition.

[The Luck (LCK) attribute has been created through a special action. LCK +1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Cadaver Absorption is now Level 1. All attributes +1.]

The Mimic felt a little disappointed. Only a +1. All the other Skills gave a total of +4, so why was this one being stingy? Still, its choice had already been made. Complaining about it now would be meaningless. Not that there was anyone around who would listen to such a complaint in the first place. Shrugging its non-existent shoulders, the Mimic turned its attention to the bloodied corpse in front of it.

These were the remains of a high-leveled adventurer, a prize that was hard to come by in these parts. The Mimic would surely want to use Cadaver Absorption on this body. But while doing so now might give it an immediate power boost, wouldn’t it be wiser to put it in Storage and save it for later? If its Attributes and Shapeshift Level went up, then it would have a better chance of getting something useful out of this rare opportunity.

It was a dilemma, one that would stump most people. Should they try to gain power now, or put it off so they could stack the odds in their favor? While aiming for a better chance was attractive, it might still turn out to be a colossal waste of time. Not to mention that whether they lived long enough to take advantage of that time investment was another question entirely. It was difficult to find the right answer and every person would have their own opinion on the matter.

Well, the one who was making this decision wasn‘t really a person.

CHOMP CHOMP MUNCH MUNCH

It was a simple creature which immediately made its choice. Or rather, it completely failed to realize there was even a choice to begin with. Even if the faux-chest was significantly smarter when compared to others of its kind, it was still a Mimic. In the grand scheme of things, it was still a moron.

BURP

And, being the moron that it was, it neglected to activate Cadaver Absorption beforehand.

Part Five

A rhythmic smacking noise echoed through the dungeon. It was the sound of wood being slammed against stone. The cause of this disturbance was an idiotic box that had just realized its mistake.

The Mimic swayed furiously on its numerous tiny legs and smashed its side into the rock wall for the umpteenth time.

[You have suffered minor blunt trauma. HP -2.]

The familiar message had been repeating itself intermittently over the last ten minutes. The moron in question was punishing itself for being overly eager. Just when things were getting good, it had let an amazing chance slip away. Surely even a single one of that Necromancer's Skills or Jobs would have given it a tremendous power boost!

"KISHAAAAA!" it yelled and smashed itself against the wall with a bit of extra force.

[You have suffered minor blunt trauma. HP -5.]

Enough was enough. This behavior was getting it nowhere while wasting valuable HP. It calmed itself down and began cleaning up the mess like usual. It didn't bother with the numerous giant rat corpses though - those were already crumbling to dust. Another few minutes and they would return to the dungeon that spawned them.

After its lair had been returned to its former unsoiled glory, it scuttled back to its spot and resumed its disguise as a 'wounded' wooden chest. And it waited.

Hours turned to days and days turned to weeks. The Mimic patiently stood there without moving a single muscle. It didn't mind, though. It was pretty much born for this sort of thing. But every living being had a limit to how long it can sit around and do absolutely nothing.

[You are hungry. Automatic HP and MP recovery are now halved.]

Something inside the Mimic growled. Its bottomless pit of a stomach was running on empty. The most primal need to eat and survive clashed with the Mimic's natural hunting instinct. Should it abide by its Hider's Intuition or follow the impulse to seek prey immediately? This was an important

decision for this creature. After all, it had never ventured more than a dozen or so meters from its birthplace.

Having made up what passed for its mind, it sprouted its numerous tiny legs and lifted itself off the ground. Lunch was unlikely to come on its own, so it would go find it instead. It scuttled sideways towards the direction most of its prey had come from. However, it paused when it reached the edge of the unnaturally smooth and even ground found around its birthplace. It had tried to walk further once before, only to have jagged rocks and pebbles poke and scrape its sensitive underside. It was not a pleasant sensation. Therefore, its current mode of transportation would need to be revised.

The Mimic put its Shapeshift Skill to use. It could change the structure of its body to a certain degree, but its species - that of Mimic (Lesser) - could not completely abandon its original box-like shape. What it could do, however, was alter the other bits of its body. It sat on the ground and retracted its tiny limbs. After a short while, six long, smooth, spider-like legs grew out steadily from its sides.

While it may not have been able to shift its body as freely as something like a Slime or Mud Elemental, it did have a natural talent for imitating things. After all, Mimics gotta mimic. And in this situation, it was copying the appearance of a small spider that made its nest directly above the Mimic's resting spot. Having literally nothing better to do over the last two weeks, the monster simply observed the tiny arachnid with its magical perception. The way its multi-jointed legs climbed up the wall and walked along its thread was thoroughly entertaining, so it ended up memorizing quite a few of those movements. And now would be the time to put that knowledge to use.

It tried to stand up on its new legs and failed miserably. The stick-like legs were too weak and too long to lift the faux-wood body. After readjusting their thickness and length several times, it finally found the right balance and stood upright. The spider-chest then made a few experimental steps. However, keeping itself from falling over proved to be tricky. Having the legs come out at the sides made the monster worryingly unsteady whenever it moved forward or backwards. It had to learn how to distribute its weight and control its center of gravity for the first time.

Eventually, it simply found it easier to change where the legs came out from. Rather than all six coming out from its sides, it spread them out evenly. One on the left, one on the right, two in the front, two in the back. Like this, it could move quickly and comfortably across any terrain the dungeon threw at it. It could even get quite a bit of speed, although stopping itself without the help of a wall or the floor proved to be a challenge.

[Proficiency level increased. Shapeshift is now Level 3. AGI +1. DEX +1. END +2.]

GURURURU

The Mimic had no time to enjoy the slight power-up. Time was ticking! Screwing up its determination, it took its first steps into the complete unknown. Its perception had no trouble penetrating the dark, but the range was limited. So the Mimic could only move slowly and quietly, keeping as low to the ground as possible without scraping its sensitive bottom against the hard surface.

Ideally it would have used Stealth, but moving around under its effects steadily drained MP. That wasn't something it was willing to do considering its stunted recovery speed.

It shuffled up and down the tunnels, passing by its fellow monsters. They were all born from the same 'womb' and thus shared a slight telepathic connection with each other. They were not hunter and prey, but kin. So rather than get in each other's way, the different species of monsters simply exchanged curt greeting-like gestures as they walked past each other.

The Mimic kept searching the tunnels, actively hunting for prey. But it never found any. In fact, all this moving around simply made things worse.

[You are ravenous. Automatic HP and MP recovery are now disabled.]

While waiting in ambush, mimics entered a sort of suspended animation. This not only allowed them to better preserve their energy and stamina, it also meant their presence was thinned out. So having a shut-in like that suddenly move around would make it tired without question. The frustrated monster had every right to wonder why it had to go through all this hassle just for a meal.

In reality, this sequence of events was more or less the natural order of things.

Every dungeon had something called Minimum Monster Level. This depended on the quality and quantity of mana permeating through the air and ground. Monsters sprang forth naturally over time in such places, birthed from seemingly thin air by the abnormally high concentrations of magical energy. Denser mana would naturally give birth to more powerful monsters.

For example, the dungeon known as the Staircase To Heaven was home to vicious creatures that would give even Level 100 adventurers a run for their money. The air on that mountain was so thick with mana that it was outright lethal. If anyone or anything under Level 70 tried to challenge it, they would choke and drown as if they were underwater.

However, that mystical substance did more than simply give birth to monsters of a certain Level. It also sustained its 'children,' allowing them to ignore basic needs such as food, water or, in some extreme cases, sleep. And these creatures would inevitably grow in strength as they repelled invaders. If they became too powerful, their home would no longer be able to sustain them and they would have to either leave the dungeon or starve to death. That was what dictated the Maximum Monster Level of a dungeon.

And this was exactly what was happening to this particular Mimic. Although it had been born as a measly Level 1, it had grown to Level 15. The Green Zone of the Litigar Dungeon Complex had a Maximum Monster Level of 6, meaning this particular individual had long ago outgrown its home. Its dormant state and steady supply of blood and meat had staved off its hunger so far, but something had changed. The meals-on-legs stopped coming entirely. And the Mimic's exploration soon revealed the answer as to why.

"Huck!" it cursed. Part of the dungeon was sealed off. Vertical and horizontal steel bars were welded to create a formidable grate. It blocked off the two-meter tall circular tunnel, cutting off any and all foot traffic through the passage.

After Valeria's mysterious disappearance, the nearby town simply decided to seal off the highly dangerous area and let nature take its course. Anything that could take down a Level 20 adventurer was clearly over the Maximum Monster Level and would just starve to death. Even something like eating its fellow monsters wouldn't save it - their bodies would disappear into raw mana before they could be digested.

Also, quarantine was ultimately cheaper than issuing a subjugation Quest. So what if 20% of the Green Zone was sealed off? The newbies could still hunt leisurely in the remainder of the maze-like dungeon.

The Mimic knew very little about such circumstances, but it recognized this mass of metal as the source of its dilemma. Even it wasn't dense enough to fail to realize this abnormality and the sudden lack of prey were linked. The question was - what could it do about it? It desperately needed to get past it, so it tried several things.

First it tried pushing its body through the gaps in the grate, but they were too small. Although it could shapeshift, it was still a Lesser Mimic that couldn't abandon its chest-like body shape. Only something like a Slime would be able to pass through these. Impossible things were impossible, so it gave up on that and decided to try brute force.

It spat out a sword from its Storage and gripped it with a red tentacle-like tongue. It swung its weapon repeatedly against the grate. The metal-on-metal impacts caused bell-like noises to reverberate through the cave while sparks pierced the darkness. But, as expected, the forged steel bars did not budge a single bit. If anything, it was the iron sword that was getting bent out of shape instead.

After a while, it gave up. Wasting stamina like this was counterproductive. Ideally it would just eat this obstacle, thus killing two goblins with one Fireball. But since it couldn't even chew up the solid iron armor and weapons in its Storage, something like forged and enchanted steel was way out of its league. It tossed the slightly chipped blade into the air and swallowed it back up, sending it to-

Swallowed?

The creature was suddenly struck by the first epiphany of its life. So far, it had opted to 'swallow' whenever it encountered something it couldn't eat. The obstacle before it was something it couldn't eat. Therefore, why not try to 'swallow' it instead?

[A special action has been performed. WIS +1.]

Now this was promising! The 'special action' that made its WIS Attribute rise was undoubtedly that of 'getting a brilliant idea!'

Emboldened by this wild assumption, the Mimic backed off from the grate, turned around and opened its mouth. A swirling purple abyss appeared inside and started spewing out dozens of items, one after the other. It was about to swallow a circular mass of steel two meters in diameter, so it needed the extra room in its Storage. By the time it was done, the Mimic had created a pile of bloodstained metal almost as tall as it was. All that was left in its pocket dimension were three swords and a dagger.

It faced the grate again and tipped forward on its spider-like legs. Opening its maw, it put both its lower and upper sets of teeth against the steel rods as if trying to bite them. It mustered up part of the MP it had remaining and opened a Storage portal so that it overlapped with the metal bars. But try as it might, the swirling hole refused to grow larger than about forty centimeters.

“HUCK!” it cursed again while still clinging onto the infuriating metal rods. Being as dumb as it was, it failed to realize the obvious difference in size. Disappointed, it pulled itself away from the troublesome cage, causing the Storage portal to abruptly collapse.

And then a sharp pain permeated through the monster’s entire being. The Mimic hissed and screamed with a high-pitched howl as it thrashed about in agony. Every part of its rectangular faux-wood frame convulsed violently, as if it was trying to rip itself apart.

[Your Storage Skill has backfired due to improper use. Your body suffers from the feedback. HP -100.]

Magic was not a toy. Improper use of it could carry dire, sometimes lethal consequences. And something like ripping open a hole in reality was no exception. In fact, it was especially true for spatial manipulation magic invoked by the likes of the Storage Skill. What the Mimic had unintentionally done just now was equivalent to trying to shut a door with its metaphorical foot in the way. If this sort of thing happened with more powerful spatial magic, such as the Teleport or Gate spells, there would have been very little left of the poor thing.

It wasn’t like this moron actually understood the basic principles of magic, though. It had simply accepted the Storage portal opening inside its jaws as ‘a thing that happens when I want it to.’

“Heeh. Heeh. Heeh. Heeh,” it panted.

The Mimic had collapsed next to the pile of discarded weapons and armor, still reeling from that unbearable moment of pain. The monster then felt anger wash over it. Why did this stupid hard thing have to be in its way? In a fit of rage, it stretched out its tongue and wrapped the tip around a small round shield resting on the pile of pilfered armaments. It flung the disk-like object at the steel bars with full force as if they were somehow responsible for its misfortune.

The iron-reinforced wooden shield flew horizontally like a frisbee, crashing into the steel grating and falling to the ground, making an awful racket in the process. Then a part of said grating slowly fell backwards, making a small clanging sound as it also hit the stone floor.

The Mimic was speechless. Not that it could actually speak properly in the first place. The newly made hole was just over forty centimeters in diameter. The steel rods looked like someone had severed them with an extremely clean sword strike. In truth, the Storage portal did actually remove some of the forged steel grating. The gateway's sudden collapse practically disintegrated a very small amount of matter around its edge, cutting through a portion of the metal rods. Since that one area of the blockade was technically no longer attached to the rest of it, it just needed a small jolt to tip over. Something that the Mimic's rage-fueled shield throw inadvertently made possible.

[A special action has been performed. LCK +1.]

If the Mimic was aware of the concept of dumb luck, it might have been insulted at this message. Instead it was simply happy at the sudden, albeit completely inexplicable, Attribute gain. It picked itself up off the ground and turned itself sideways to squeeze through the gap. It then continued on its way with a spring in its step and a smile on whatever it had that passed for a face.

Part Six

The Mimic patiently awaited its prey. It sat there, unmoving. Although part of it wanted to ‘get up and go,’ in the end it followed its hunting instinct and stood still. The ground in this area of the dungeon was fairly flat, but it was far from being smooth. Of particular concern was one nasty bump that seemed to dig into the creature’s underside, causing it to remain slightly tilted to the side.

This was more than a little uncomfortable. Physically, there was no pain, but standing slightly lopsided felt wrong. Unnatural. The fact that a chest could even feel discomfort in the first place was already unnatural enough to begin with, so it really had no room to complain. It could reposition itself to be more comfortable, but it was unwilling. At least, not right now. It was a very bad idea to be doing something like that with those heavy footsteps steadily approaching it.

Five humans turned a corner and proceeded down the straight section of tunnel that the disguised monster was in. This particular stretch of cave was roomier than your average dungeon passage. It was eight meters wide and just over four meters tall. It had plenty of space to allow two big parties of adventurers to pass by each other without worry. However, these five were definitely different from the newbies that frequented this part of the dungeon. Their equipment clearly set them apart.

The one in front was a grizzled, middle-aged man. His torso was protected by a solid steel cuirass that glistened in the light from the lantern in his hand. His other hand was gripping a sturdy looking wooden spear with a steel tip. Iron plates protected his shins and forearms. A simple iron helmet encompassed his scalp, with chainmail hanging from its rim like a curtain, covering the sides and back of his head. It rattled obnoxiously with each step, but it was something this man had long gotten used to.

He was a guard, just like the four identically equipped people behind him. Although adventurers were common, they were still but a fraction of this world’s population. Not everyone wished to go off and die in some hellhole while chasing a misguided thirst for adventure, gold and glory. Many were content with simply accepting a weekly wage for mundane hard work, and living out relatively peaceful lives while protected by sturdy walls.

So why were these five peacekeepers in a dungeon where they clearly did not belong? Because they got word of strange noises coming from the direction of the sealed-off portion of the Green Zone. The mayor was a notorious cheapskate, so nobody in this armed detail was surprised he sent them rather than qualified adventurers to look after the bloody thing. Granted, all of these men were between Level 10 and 12, so it's not like something in here was a real threat to them. But they still had to waste valuable time on something that was clearly just greenhorns getting scared at things that go bump in the dark.

This was the third time this week they had to walk down this dank and musty cave just because some greenhorn raised a fuss. It would just be another giant rat that got stuck while trying to fit through the metal grate's gaps. After all, nothing in there could break that enchanted steel with brute force. The artisans who made it assured the mayor it would need to be attacked by something that was at least Level 30. Anything weaker than a certain threshold wouldn't even leave a scratch on it. Therefore, this entire patrol was a pointless endeavor the mayor ordered just so he could save face. The recent string of disappearances was more than enough to make people question his so-called leadership, so something like putting on a pointless show of force came naturally.

But still, these five got paid to follow orders, so they kept on marching.

The Mimic they were rapidly approaching was, simply put, scared shitless. The loose group of guards walking silently down the stone corridor gave off an extremely intimidating air. Running away was not an option - it would be immediately spotted and killed. Fighting was an even worse idea. Hiding had very little chance of success, but it was a chance nonetheless.

So it hid. It remained looking like a perfectly unassuming and completely ordinary wooden chest, in some vague hope that it would be overlooked. The armed patrol approached the monster, unaware of what it was. The man in front gave the out-of-place box a sidelong glance before moving on. The next pair of guards did the same. The fourth one had a different idea. He mercilessly thrust his spear into it. It pierced the faux-wood shell and drove deep into the monster.

[You have suffered a devastating blow. HP -53.]
[You died.]

It died instantly, without even getting a chance to scream in pain. Its killer withdrew his spear all at once, causing yellow blood to splatter all over the floor.

“Hey, come on man!” complained the man behind him. “Why’d you do that?! Now I have monster blood all over my trousers! My wife’s gonna kill me!”

“Again, Roger?” let out the man at the very front. He was peeking back at Roger over his shoulder. “You know full well killing that thing wasn’t worth the trouble, right?”

“Yeah, I know my Job won’t go up much from these Level 1s and 2s, but at least my Spear Mastery is growing steadily,” explained Roger.

He wasn’t wrong. While Jobs would progress very little if one picked on opponents much weaker than them, Skill Proficiency was another story. As long as one met certain conditions, their Skills would steadily climb in power. Granted, it took more and more work to attain the higher Levels, but Mastery Skills were easy to train. As long as one dealt damage to a living thing with the appropriate weapon or school of magic, the relevant Mastery Skill would go up. A difference in Levels didn’t matter in this scenario.

“Don’t fuck with me,” spat out the squad leader at the front. “I know full well you just like stomping on ants.”

“Ah, ya got me there, chief,” shrugged Roger. It was the truth. The excuse about his Spear Mastery was valid, but it was just that - an excuse. He was just a malicious prick and a natural bully.

His squad leader scowled at the insubordinate subordinate. “Whatever. Come on, let’s get this over with,” he ordered. There was a time and place for discipline and this was neither of them. They went on their way, forgetting about the dead Mimic.

The other Mimic that was following them, however, would not forget. They had just murdered its kin in cold blood. Cold, tasty, nourishing blood. The half-spider half-chest had been stalking them quietly for the last several minutes, looking for a chance to kill and eat them. At first it was wondering if it could take them, or whether it should just let them be. However, it couldn’t quite bring itself to turn around and seek easier prey. But that was then, this was now.

And right now it felt like it absolutely had to murder the shit out of them. Although it didn't particularly know or care for its dead kin, was there any living being that can stand idle after watching its kind slaughtered? Probably, but this wasn't one of them. The monster screwed up its determination and prepared to attack the patrol. Even if there were five of them, it was still a higher Level. If it could take out a few of them before the rest could respond, then it would surely be able to clinch victory.

It opened its mouth and spat out its long, thick tongue. This part of it was extremely dexterous and malleable - perfect for the Shapeshift Skill. The flat mass of flesh split into three separate tongues, connected at the base. It then accessed its Storage and took out three plain swords - one in each tongue-tentacle. It did not want to waste mana gobbling up all that worthless trash it left behind, so the only thing remaining in its pocket dimension was a curious dagger that was especially shiny.

Now armed, the Mimic activated its Stealth Skill and crept up on the patrol. It glided silently towards the still-bickering pair of guards at the very back. Engrossed in their conversation about who was going to be on armor-scrubbing duty, they failed to realize the threat approaching them. The casual pace of their walk did not help matters much, either, since it allowed their stalker to rapidly gain ground on them. Although the Stealth Skill drained its MP with every step, the monster still had more than enough to fulfill its purpose.

Having gotten about half a meter behind them, the Mimic reared up slightly on its imitation spider legs and raised two of its armed improvised tentacles into the air. Now that it was this close, it perceived a gap in their armor. A strip of sweat-stained underclothing was visible between the steel cuirass and the iron helmet, exposing the base of their necks and a bit of their shoulder. It angled the blades downwards and, after a momentary pause, thrust them accurately and smoothly into that opening.

The twin blades dug into both guards' collarbones from above with very little resistance.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 200% more damage. Target HP -107.]

[You have slain your target in a single strike. Assassination Proficiency increased.]

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 200% more damage. Target HP -82.]
[You have dealt a devastating blow. Target stunned for 5 seconds.]

Ignoring the familiar messages and even more familiar screams of pain, the Mimic pulled on the two swords still lodged inside its victims. Continuing the downward stabbing motion, it used the power and momentum of that thrust to throw them both to the ground.

The rest of the squad turned around immediately when they noticed their comrades yell out in pain. The first thing they saw was two armored guards being thrown viciously against the stone ground. Their metal-clad backs made audible thuds as they smashed into the stone floor. In the next instant, a sword fell on the one on the right - likely Roger - stabbing him clean through the throat. The three men in front stared in mute horror as a trio of bloodied blades were retracted from the bodies of their friends. The weapons almost seemed to dance in the air for a moment. And then they noticed it. A creature like no other.

It had the body of a simple treasure chest. Its lid had been opened to reveal numerous dagger-like teeth. If it was just this, they might assume it was a Mimic. But this was nothing like the monster Roger had slain a minute ago.

The wood-like surface was tattered, cracked and splintered all over. It looked like someone had kicked this particular box down a very long flight of stairs. The various gaps and holes in it revealed a brown mass of slightly pulsating muscle underneath. Anyone who glanced at this appearance would immediately realize it was no simple chest. Well, it was still simple, but that's beside the point.

Six long, slender legs jutted out from its undersides, completely mismatched with the main body. It was as if someone had glued a pig-sized spider's legs onto the monster as a sort of prank. But the way they made very slight, almost automatic adjustments to support its body were natural enough to make one think this monster was born with them.

And worst of all, growing out of that tooth-filled abyss that passed for its maw, were three meter-long tentacles. The bright red flesh undulated in a disgusting manner, the tips of each horrific limb gripping tightly onto the handle of a sword. The same weapons that had just robbed two men of their

lives before they could even ask for help. They were attacked with no warning and for little reason. Only a monster could be this cruel.

“KEHAAAAAAAAHH!” it yelled. Its putrid breath washed over the stunned humans, enhancing the surreal sight before them. The nightmarish creature began bearing down onto the closest guardsman while brandishing its trio of swords. The simple man who was used to scolding troublemaking kids or chasing pickpockets was frozen in terror. The worst thing he’d ever faced was a duo of armed bandits, but at least those were human. That situation was something he had trained and prepared for. The veritable storm of steel and teeth that was hurtling towards him was so bizarre that he doubted anyone could be prepared for something so absurd. He made a panicked attempt to ready his spear and ward off the assault, but the Mimic was already upon him. The three blades made sharp sounds as they drew wide arcs in the air.

Having to split the muscles of its tongue in three made each of the Mimic’s blows significantly weaker than they would be otherwise. The fact that it was slashing rather than stabbing meant that its DEX attribute was not helping right now, either. However, it was using three weapons instead of one. The sheer number of blows it could make meant it could deal out a steady stream of punishment that whittled down and exhausted its prey without giving it any room to breathe.

The three swords struck the guard simultaneously from all sides. The lower one cut open the man’s thigh, dealing 25 damage to his HP. The middle blow dug into his unarmored bicep, dealing 23 damage. The high blow bounced off the rim of his metal helmet. Although the armor deflected the worst of it, the force of the blow still robbed 9 of his HP due to the blunt trauma. He yelled out in pain, stumbled backwards and fell on his ass. His weapon fell out of his hands and clattered on the rocky ground. He had 44 HP remaining and was bleeding profusely from his leg, but he was still alive.

His two comrades were already rushing to his aid, spears at the ready. They both thrust their two-meter long weapons at the monster. It tried to back off, but was too slow. One of them stabbed it in the side, shaving off 34 of the monster’s HP. It screamed in pain and leaped backwards to avoid further injury. The Mimic had still not recovered from its earlier Storage mishap, so it was in a precarious position. It currently only had about 40% of its HP remaining. It could not afford to be wounded again. It had seen the

destructive power of those long pointy things earlier, but feeling it first-hand on its own body woke it up. The monster may have bitten off more than it could chew.

It stretched out its tentacles and attempted to strike at the two men, but the difference in reach became instantly apparent. Its sword swings came nowhere near the two guards, while their spears threatened to skewer it at a moment's notice. If anything, it was being pushed back, suffering several scratches on its tongues as a result.

The monster had clearly underestimated its opponents. And while those two were keeping it busy, the one on the ground had already taken out a small glass flask with a blood-red liquid. The wounded guard sprinkled half of the healing potion on his wounds and drank the rest. The Mimic recognized this pattern - adventurers it failed to finish off would sometimes do those things and recover miraculously from their injuries. The Mimic then had to suffer numerous wounds as it subdued its target with force.

So, to sum it up, the monster realized one simple fact. It was fucked. The two in front of it were obviously covering for their wounded comrade. When he stood up they would undoubtedly chase down the creature and end it. It had killed their kind, so they would unquestionably seek vengeance. After all, that sort of thing was what more or less started this encounter in the first place.

But the Mimic had a secret weapon. A special move that could fell even that seemingly impossible wall it encountered earlier. It made some more space between itself and its duo of opponents, drawing them a few steps further away from the third one. It then swung one of its tendrils around and haphazardly tossed one of its swords with all the strength it could muster.

From the monster's perspective, it was that half-assed shield throw that toppled the steel grate. And this time it was using an actual weapon with all its strength, so this move's destructive power would unquestionably rise. Well, it wasn't wrong about that last part, but the outcome would still not be what it expected.

The sword spun around itself a few times as it cut through the air. It missed its targets completely, bouncing off the stone ceiling with a clang and falling harmlessly to the side. The result of the monster's 'Killer Move' was that it

had, essentially, disarmed itself. There was a brief moment of silence as everyone present processed what just happened.

“Huck,” it cursed.

In some ways, the Mimic was lucky its antics were not considered to be ‘special actions’ that conferred a loss of Attributes. Otherwise its INT and WIS would already be dropping towards 0. Possibly beyond.

Having been disarmed by its own stupidity, the Mimic was left in an unquestionably weaker position. It was barely able to fend off two spears with its three swords, so the idea of facing three spears with only two blades was not a pleasant one. It made a few unsteady steps backward, unsure of what to do. Should it run away and live to fight another day? Was that really an option? Even if it ran away, would it find food? Would these people let it escape in the first place? Why was there a stone that looked a little bit like a rat’s head on the ground? Come to think of it, why were there no other monsters around? And why was it suddenly asking itself these various questions in the first place? None of that pondering was getting it any closer to not being dead.

There was still some distance between it and the guards, but they seemed wary of approaching it. They were obviously waiting for their buddy to get back in the fight, and by the looks of things that moment would be here soon. The Mimic needed to fight back, but to do that it needed a new weapon. Luckily, there were two armed corpses under its feet. And the dead were extremely generous with their belongings. It reached down its free tentacle and coiled it around one of the spears. Actually, there was another one, so it was fine if it tried its ‘Killer Move’ again, right? That first attempt was probably a fluke! Besides, it looked like an oversized arrow. And arrows flew really, really well, something this monster had learned with its own body when it failed to properly ambush that Ranger about a month ago.

And so, about a second after obtaining its new acquisition, the Mimic threw it forward with all its might. The spear, unlike the sword, was indeed a weapon that could be thrown. It cut through the air at a speed that was hard for the human eye to track, especially in these dim conditions. But, much like the first attempt, it missed both guards, flying between them without leaving so much as a scratch.

“HUCK!” the monster yelled.

But rather than the sound of metal uselessly hitting on stone, what was heard next was a piercing yell.

“Aaargh! Ah hahaaaaaah! AAAAH!” screamed the third living guard on the scene. His two comrades unwittingly turned their heads around. The wounded man was still struggling to his feet when the errant spear had managed to hit him. It impaled him squarely in the groin, just below the edge of his steel cuirass. He was screaming and thrashing around on the ground in a pain that seemed to resonate with every male in that tunnel.

[A special action has been performed. LCK +1.]

Ignoring that seemingly random Attribute increase, the Mimic quickly lunged at the two guards. Their attention had shifted and their hands had stopped – if there was ever a chance to turn things around, it would be now. It dashed in between their outstretched spears and thrust both of its swords forward. The dumbfounded guards turned their heads around just in time to get stabbed in the face.

[You have dealt a Critical Strike! Target HP -78.]
[You have dealt a devastating blow. Target stunned for 5 seconds.]
[You have dealt a Critical Strike! Target HP -79.]
[You have dealt a devastating blow. Target stunned for 5 seconds.]
[Proficiency level increased. Sword Mastery is now Level 5. STR +2. DEX +2.]

It was checkmate. Or rather, it would be if there were any strategy or planning involved. It was a miracle that the two men did not die on the spot after having the backs of their throats pierced clean through. The Mimic promptly withdrew its blades and slashed at their faces, achieving what was colloquially known as a ‘double kill.’ It then methodically moved in on the final guard and finished him off while he was still writhing on the ground.

“SKEEEEEEEEEEEeeee…!”

A triumphant screech resounded through the dungeon. The Mimic was overcome with the thrill of winning a hard battle for the first time in its life. While it did sometimes fail to ambush its prey, the ensuing scuffle would be little more than an annoyance for the over-leveled monster. If there was ever a time for it to express its joy of victory through the language of dance, it was now.

It wasn’t skill or strategy that won the day. It was its own idiocy. The unpredictable and erratic behavior it displayed caught its enemy by surprise on more than one occasion. The creature simply had to recognize its opportunity to act and seize it. It may not be very good at thinking things through, but the Mimic’s mind was already a steel trap when it came to taking advantage of a moment of weakness.

Trickery? Cowardice? Honor? It knew not of such things. It knew of very few things, to be honest. Even if it did know about such trivialities it would still ignore them since they would not fill its belly. And filling its belly is exactly what it needed to do right now. So without further ado, it proceeded to chow down on the five corpses in front of it.

It started with the last one to die - the one it had impaled in the groin through sheer luck. It pulled out the spear and began eating the corpse feet-first. It bit off its legs and, after spitting out the troublesome metal greaves, swallowed gleefully. It repeated the process with the arms and head, discarding the inedible armor along the way. But the torso was difficult. It was still encased in that solid steel cuirass, so getting at it was impossible. Its teeth still could not penetrate steel, after all. It left the still-armored and blood-covered torso alone and moved onto the other corpses, focusing on their limbs and heads in a similar fashion.

[Your hunger has been sated. Automatic HP and MP recovery will return to normal.]

When it was in the middle of devouring the fifth set of body parts, it finally got confirmation it was no longer starving. It felt relief wash over it. It wasn’t sure how much it actually needed to eat before the hunger went away completely.

Still, leaving behind those succulent torsos would be a terrible waste. While it wasn’t particularly picky about its food, the Mimic had preferences. It found the intestines to be the tastiest part of the human body. The head was a close runner up. The brain felt kind of bland, but the skull made pleasurable crunching noises when its teeth sank into it. It was simply fun to chew. The heart was third on its list just because of how wonderfully squishy it was. The succulent rump and thigh meat were also good, but those seemed to vary quite a bit between people. Some were stringy and tough while others were far more tender.

The point was, two of its three favorite bits were in the torso. It really wanted to get at them, so now that it was no longer in a rush, it set about trying to eat them. First, it retrieved the sword it had sent flying earlier. It then approached one of the dismembered torsos and used the blade to poke and prod at the armor. After stabbing at it from several angles, it found it could cut apart some leather straps on the side, under where the arms used to be. When it did that, the front and back plates of the armor seemed to come apart. The Mimic then lifted the steel plating to reveal the succulent meat and crunchy bones it longed for. It was almost like opening up a steamed clam.

CRUNCH MUNCH MUNCH

Only many times more gruesome. Within the horrible gnashing and crunching noises, there was the barely audible sound of glass breaking and a mysterious liquid poured out and onto the monster's sensitive tongue.

[You have used a Healing Potion. HP +40.]

It tasted like cherries, though such a detail was lost on this monster that had never tasted the fruit in question, or indeed anything other than man-flesh until just now. The magical liquid dissipated and instantly closed up the Mimic's gaping stab wound. Ironically, the one who caused that wound was the one to supply the potion to heal it.

SNAP SLURP BURP

Not that the Mimic really cared. It barely even noticed what was going on with how engrossed it was in eating its fill.

No, wasn't this already beyond its fill? Its hunger had been sated for the moment, but it might come back later. Or rather, wouldn't it definitely come back eventually? Surely it would be a good idea to put the remaining 'body oysters' in its Storage rather than eating them right now, right? It didn't know how long the corpses would keep for, but it was worth a try. Therefore, the Mimic planned ahead for the first time in its life and saved the remaining two bloodied torsos for later.

Well, it would have saved four of them, but it had already eaten two more by the time it made up its mind. It was honestly a miracle it even reached the obvious conclusion it should ration its food in the first place. So while the

execution may have been less than perfect, there was still definite improvement in its mental abilities.

Once its business in that blood-soaked tunnel was done, the Mimic relocated to the spot where its kin had died earlier. Its corpse had already disappeared back into the flow of mana from whence it came. The Mimic sat down on a spot nearby and entered its dormant state. It was still heavily wounded, so it needed to wait until its automatic HP recovery restored it to good health.

Over the next ten or so minutes, the battered, splintered faux-wood that served as its outer shell slowly grew back to its pristine state. Once its HP and MP were both completely topped off, the Mimic stood up and resumed walking. At some point it had convinced itself that leaving this place behind was for the best, so there was no point in delaying its departure any longer. And thanks to its connection with the dungeon's mana, it already knew which way the exit was.

After walking around for several minutes, it noticed the tight and claustrophobic tunnels were getting wider and wider. It could actually feel a cold breeze coming in from what was undoubtedly the outside. Feeling invigorated, it picked up the pace, its slender spider-like legs carrying it steadily onward. The walls grew wider and the ceiling became taller and taller. Eventually, it could not 'see' anything except the floor around it. All other surfaces were simply outside the ten-meter range of its magical perception.

This was a first for it. It was a strange sensation where it felt truly insignificant. But it still marched onward. As long as it had its connection to the mana in the air, it would know exactly where-

[You have left the Litigar Dungeon Complex.]
[Your connection with the dungeon has been severed.]

It froze. Something immediately felt off. Wrong. For one thing, it suddenly realized it was lost. Completely and totally lost. It no longer had any idea where it was, nor which way it was going. It wandered around aimlessly, without having a single way to tell if it was going in the right direction. After a few minutes of this, it seemed to have found its way back.

[You have entered the Litigar Dungeon Complex.]

Even if it returned, however, the invisible thread that made it the dungeon's ally was now permanently severed. It was now no longer a part of this place. It may have felt an odd desire to go back at first, but that was rapidly changing now. To monsters in a dungeon, there were no gray areas. You were either an enemy or an ally. And as it was right now, this Mimic was undoubtedly an enemy to this place. Now it no longer found the thought of eating those giant rats and bats to be repulsive. It even felt like it could easily murder its own kin without any remorse.

The monster understood the meaning behind these implications. It caught on so fast that it actually surprised itself. Could it be that it was a genius all along? Something had changed. It could form a coherent stream of thoughts for the first time in its life. Almost as if a fog was lifted from its mind.

The truth of the matter was that while the mana was guiding and nourishing it, it was also robbing it of its free will. That innate compulsion to leave the dungeon? It was being chased out by the very stuff that gave it life. The reason why it had to face a squad of armed guards instead of running away at full strength when the odds were against it? They were 'invaders' that the dungeon wanted dead.

No wonder, it thought. Even though it recognized itself as an idiot, it couldn't take any steps to rectify that flaw. Now it was different. Now, it was free. It was also scared out of its tiny mind, but it was free. And armed with this freedom, it decided to seek out its own path in life. Maybe come back later and show this dungeon who's boss!

But before that, it had to leave. The range of its perception was a problem. It was like being lost at sea with no landmarks and no compass. If the rest of the world was normally this wide, then it needed other ways of finding its way around the place. Thankfully, it already had a pretty good idea what to do. It was obvious its prey did not have the same magical perception the Mimic had. Otherwise sneaking up on people would be impossible. And through its numerous scuffles and that one battle, it learned the importance and function of a particular pair of organs. So all it needed to do was replicate them. And it was really good at that sort of thing.

Mimics gotta mimic. It was a fact of life.

It quickly grew an eye on the outside of its faux wood frame. It had eaten close to a hundred eyeballs, most of them had rolled across its tongue at

some point. So something like recreating an organ it was intimately familiar with was not a big deal. Just like with the spider legs. Although it still needed to morph and readjust the structure of the eye. After about half an hour of trying, it succeeded.

It could see. Finally, it was capable of actual sight with its very own eye! But because it was, essentially, a human eye, it could not see very well in this darkness. Still, it immediately proved useful when it spotted a group of lights coming towards it. It was an adventuring party of four people, all wearing lit lanterns on their waists. They were some forty odd meters away from the Mimic. By the looks of things, they were headed deeper into the dungeon and would walk right past it.

However, the monster felt no rush or thrill at the discovery of new prey. It no longer had to compulsively hunt and murder people just for being in this dungeon. It only felt a cold kind of indifference one would show to a stray animal. A tasty, blood-filled, succulent, crunchy animal with delicious guts and-

Okay, it would attack and eat them after all. But not because of some weird magical compulsion! This time, it chose to murder those people in cold blood by its own will. It still had to fill its belly, so why turn down free food that willingly comes to you? Actually, why even wait? Those people were dressed almost exactly like its first forty victims. If it could take five armed guards, then these weaklings would surely be no match for it!

It sprouted its spider legs, armed its trio of tongue tentacles and descended upon them like Death incarnate. This wasn't an instinctual drive to eat and live, nor was it the dungeon's mind control.

It would kill because it wanted to, with no warning and for almost no reason.

Just like any other monster would.

[General Information]
Mimic (Lesser), Genderless, 2 months old
Level 15.27 Mimic
264/264 HP (+0.4/sec)
175/175 MP (+0.3/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 44, DEX 48, AGI 36, END 44, INT 35, WIS 39, LCK 4

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 4.29
Storage - Lvl 3.11
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 1.00
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 3.65
Stealth - Lvl 3.11
Sword Mastery - Lvl 5.02

Chapter Two
Eat And Grow

Part One

The sword made a sharp sound as it fell on the neck of the last adventurer. The blade cut halfway through the black-haired man's neck, ending his life in an instant. His killer, a Mimic that had just found its freedom, went about its business. Even though it had just robbed this man and three of his friends of their lives, it did not have the capacity to care. It gave absolutely no shits about whatever it was they were screaming about as it mercilessly reaped their souls. If anyone were to witness this, they would undoubtedly assume only a being incapable of emotion was capable of such cold cruelty.

But that assumption would be untrue. In fact, the Mimic did feel something from this encounter. A distinct sense of happiness, that is. This was a perfect opportunity to finally try out its latest Skill - Cadaver Absorption. It had already wasted its first opportunity due to its own foolishness. It couldn't use it on those guard corpses since it lacked the MP and needed to satiate its hunger to recover it. And while it did still carry certain bits of those men inside its Storage, there obviously was not enough of them left to constitute a corpse.

But now, it would finally give this thing a try!

Its first choice was the bow user. The one who tried to shoot arrows at the monster as it approached. She was particularly annoying, and managed to shave off a total of 34 HP from it. Well, it wasn't like it didn't expect to get some scratches in a frontal assault like that, so it wasn't too bothered by them. It sat down next to the woman and chanted "Kadahah Akhsohsohn."

Nothing happened.

"Kadahah Akhsohsohn," it repeated. And again, nothing happened.

This was worrying. Unlike its Storage, which could be activated without chanting, Cadaver Absorption required one to speak the name of the Skill out loud while focusing on the corpse. That was just how it worked. Or at least, how it was supposed to work. Learning a new Skill gave one the basic knowledge regarding its use, so there was no doubt this was the right way to activate it. In fact, the Mimic could recall how to use its Skills flawlessly, which was a bit odd in itself all things considered.

Still, it decided to double-check. After all, the information it wanted was just a couple of thoughts away.

[Cadaver Absorption]
Allows the Mimic to absorb residual knowledge and power from the remains of its prey.
Requirements: Level 15 Mimic, WIS 30, INT 30, Has devoured at least 30 of the same Species.
Type: Active, Corpse-targeted
Activation Time: 2 seconds
Cost: 150 MP
Range: 2 Meters
[Effects]
A portion of the target's Attributes, Skill Proficiency or Job Levels will be permanently added to the Mimic's Status. What is absorbed is random.
This Skill can fail. Success rate depends on the Level of this Skill and the strength of the LCK Attribute.
The amount of knowledge or power absorbed increases with each Level of the Shapeshift Skill.

It examined the Skill window once more. The Activation Time referred to how much time the Skill would take to fulfill its purpose and produce the desired effect. However, that was supposed to come after the monster had started the process by chanting the name. Since absolutely nothing happened in the first place, this particular aspect of it was clearly not the problem.

Its MP was currently full at 170 so the Cost wasn't the issue either. As for the Range, it wasn't sure exactly how far '2 Meters' was. Was it too far away? Maybe that was the issue? It certainly wouldn't hurt to try. The chest sprouted its legs and sat right next to the body. This was probably within range, right?

"Kadahah Akhsohsohn."

Nope, nothing. Then… maybe it was misunderstanding what Corpse-targeted meant? Maybe this woman was far too skinny to count as a dead body? That was certainly a possibility - she was basically skin and bones, except for two soft-looking lumps in the middle of her torso. Were they nutrient repositories, perhaps? The Mimic vaguely remembered that black-robed woman it killed shortly before acquiring this troublesome Skill. She

had some big ones too, but it had a hard time determining what purpose these things served, if any.

“Ack!” it yelped. No good, it was getting distracted. It needed more information. Ah, but information regarding Skills was usually a thought away, so maybe it just needed the right thought? It focused its mind on the ‘Corpse-targeted’ term in the still-open Skill window. About a second later, a different screen popped up.

[Corpse-targeted]
Requires a corpse.
The corpse’s original brain(s) and heart(s) must be present to establish it as a viable target.
Missing limbs or body parts will reduce the strength of the generated effect.

Now it was getting somewhere! So the Skill needed both the brain and the heart to function and needed all of the body’s bits to produce the best result. If the heart was that juicy thing in the chest and the brain was that mushy bland-tasting thing inside the crunchy skull, then that would explain why the Skill failed to activate.

The Mimic got up and walked off toward the wall. It stretched out its tongue and grabbed the bloodied, pointy-eared head that had been sitting there for a while. It dragged it along the ground by its long platinum blonde hair. Resisting the urge to pop it in its mouth, it walked back to the woman and placed it squarely on her chest.

It let out a long breath that was probably intended to be a sigh. If it knew the head had to be attached, it wouldn’t have bothered to remove it from the rest of her in the first place. Then again, it was slightly unintentional. Her neck was entirely too slender so the monster’s sword strike cut clean through it. That black-haired guy it killed last seemed to be made of much sterner stuff since his neck actually offered some resistance.

So, now that all the parts were accounted for, it sat right next to the body and repeated the chant for the third- no, fourth? Or fifth?

It sat down and repeated the chant.

“Kadahah Akhsohsohn.”

Now, something definitely happened. It actually felt the majority of its MP disappear in an instant and leaving it in a tired, somewhat lethargic state.

About a dozen or so transparent purple tentacles sprouted from its narrow sides, each of them about two meters in length. These mysteriously glowing appendages looked like they weren't actually there - like the Mimic was seeing only an outline of their true form. Ignoring its idle wonderment, the appendages immediately bent towards their target and skewered it in multiple places. The soft, pink skin quickly shriveled up as the corpse rapidly became nothing but skin and bones. The Mimic noticed unidentifiable gray goop rapidly move up each of the twelve undulating tentacles and disappear somewhere inside its body.

Precisely two seconds after the monster finished the chant, the tentacles retracted inside itself, dragging the rest of that colorless mass with them.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a minor success!]
[6% of the target's highest Attribute has been added to your own. AGI +1.]

"Yosha!"

It worked! The Mimic didn't get much out of it, but it definitely worked! A new way of growing stronger! Ah, but it didn't get to actually eat any of that. The simple creature's excitement level quickly fell down to zero when it realized that. It wanted to strip the flesh, rip the meat and crush the bones. Not liquefy and drink it all without even tasting it. Where was the fun in that?

The gluttonous monster took one more look at the corpse. All that was left of the former elven Ranger was a skeleton wrapped in gray, chalk like skin. It seemed to crumble into nothing under the weight of her clothing. Even the severed head was left as nothing but a skull with a few patches of skin and several strands of gray hair. Oddly enough, there was no hole in it even though two of the tentacles most assuredly pierced it from both sides.

This looked completely unappetizing. Was there even a point in eating these dried out remains? Actual dirt would probably be more nourishing than this pile of ash. Still, it was a way of using corpses for something other than pigging out. That was definitely a good thing. Even if it had a shortage of dead bodies, all it had to do was find something it could kill and BAM! Problem solved!

Feeling better about the whole 'people have no taste when I drink them' situation, the Mimic went over to the next corpse - a bearded, bald man in a chainmail shirt. It sat next to him and waited patiently for its MP to recover.

Since it already saw the Skill in action, it now had a good grasp of the range. It simply needed to be close enough for those ethereal tentacles to reach the corpse.

Roughly ten minutes later, its MP had gone back to full.

“Kadahah Akhsohsohn,” it chanted and the tentacles happily liquefied and drank up the former Warrior.

[Your Cadaver Absorption has failed.]

“Nyeh,” it shrugged. It’s not like it expected it to work every time. It had already given up on chowing down on these people so it just went through the motions. Since this Skill targeted only living tissue, any gear and equipment the adventurers were using was left behind. The elf from before just had a tunic, a pair of trousers, a bow and some arrows in a quiver. This guy, however, had a sword and shield.

It was the first time the Mimic had given someone a chance to use their shield. The wooden, iron-reinforced disk had managed to deflect two of the monster’s swords. The third one ran the Warrior through the chest while he was off balance, killing him instantly. Still, it was a relatively impressive display that piqued the Mimic’s curiosity. Wearing armor was out of the question, but its tri-tongue could easily intercept and deflect attacks with this sturdy thirty centimeter wide circle. After some practice, of course.

Also, it could probably double as a weapon. One such shield was responsible for knocking a hole through that infuriating steel grate, after all. It was an attractive idea to be certain! Having made up its mind, the creature tossed the warrior’s sword and shield into its Storage for safe keeping and walked over to the third corpse. Ten minutes and another chant later, the gray-haired Priest was also slurped up.

[Your Cadaver Absorption has failed.]
[Proficiency level increased. Cadaver Absorption is now Level 2. All attributes +1.]

The Skill-up was good. The failure - not so much. Still, a higher Level of Cadaver Absorption meant a better chance of gaining something useful. The Mimic would have to train this up as much as possible so that it would be ready the next time it caught something big. But how much of a chance did it

actually have? Was there a way to find out? Would it even comprehend what all those numbers meant?

It had to wait for its MP to come back anyway, so it had some time to kill. It decided to mess around with the Status and Skill screens inside its head. After about five minutes of random window-opening, it tried to focus on a particular line of the Cadaver Absorption Skill Screen - the one that read ‘This Skill can fail. Success rate depends on the Level of this Skill and the strength of the LCK Attribute.’

Nothing happened, as expected. It was hard to ‘focus’ on a long sentence like that. Instead, it tried to home in on individual words.

[Luck (LCK)]
Very slightly tips the odds in your favor.
Very slightly increases your chances of finding items of Uncommon quality and above.

[Skill]
Improves your understanding and expertise when it comes to performing certain tasks or using specific tools or weapons.
Proper use of a Skill will raise its Proficiency.
When Proficiency hits a certain threshold, Skill Level will rise and you will receive a permanent Attribute bonus.
You can Inspect individual Skills for more information.

[Attribute]
Improves a specific aspect of your mental or physical condition.
New Attributes may appear as a result of specific actions or conditions.
You can Inspect individual Attributes for more information.

These were the only screens it could open. Just like the others until now, it saw a lot of confusing things that didn’t make much sense. The Mimic felt it could spend a really, really long time just digging through all these endless menus and screens. It tried to limit itself to the ‘surface’ as much as possible, but all this ‘reading’ still felt like hard work. Liberated or not, it was still very much an airhead. Mentally strenuous activities like this always gave it a headache. Or was it a toothache? Maybe a chest ache? Well, it wasn’t quite sure what, but something ached.

[A special action has been performed. INT +1.]

Now this was odd. This was only the third time that INT had gone up on its own. The first time was when it learned how to hold a sword without hurting itself. The second time was when it found out about the Status screen and learned how to navigate it. Feeling extra curious, it decided to double-check it anyway.

[Intelligence (INT)]
Improves your memory and capacity for knowledge.
Every 1 point of INT increases maximum MP by 5.

There was no change from the last time it went over its Attributes. While these screens did describe each one, they held very few hints as to how to raise them outside of Level Ups. The Mimic wasn't able to grasp the requirements for these 'special actions' at all. The only thing it knew for certain was that it was getting less and less of these as time went on.

The truth was that increasing one's Attributes through training demanded that they consistently pushed their limits. Lift heavy things until your arms are about to fall out. Run until you're throwing up. Read books until your head's about to burst. And then keep on going. It was a painful and arduous process. The only reason the Mimic seemed to enjoy frequent boosts at the start was that it had very little to begin with. In actuality, raising a new Attribute to 5 seemed to happen very rapidly once it got past the hurdle of earning the first point of it. Even then there were some Attributes that couldn't be 'discovered' at all, and the only way to gain access to them was to obtain certain Jobs or Skills.

For example, that very first point of INT this Mimic earned shortly after its birth? Just remembering what had happened ten minutes ago pushed it beyond the limit of 0 INT. It had come a long way since then, but such revelations were still out of reach. There's no way something born less than three months ago would be able to deduce that sort of obtuse rule. If it had figured it out on its own, its WIS would surely have gone up as a result.

[Wisdom (WIS)]
Improves critical thinking and decision making.
Every 10 points of WIS increases automatic MP recovery by 0.1 per second.

Ultimately, the mentally immature monster ended up staring blankly at its final target until its MP filled up. And then it casually absorbed the final corpse - that of the black-haired scruffy-bearded man.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a major success!]
[A special action has been performed. LCK +1.]
[6% of the target's highest Job Level has been added to your own.]

[WARNING: Unable to create Job at Level 0. Compensating.]

[Level up!]
[The Mental Fortitude (MNT) Attribute has been created through a special action. MNT +1.]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 1 Warlock! INT +2. MNT +2. END +2.]
[You have learned a new Spell: Shadowbolt.]

The Mimic's only eye blinked several times. It suddenly had so many questions that the metaphorical gears in its mind ground to a complete halt. If it could give voice to its most pressing concern, it would undoubtedly shout out something like 'Where the hell did all my Levels go?!'

"SHASHUSH!" it screamed in panic.

[General Information]
Mimic (Lesser), Genderless, 2 months old
Level 15.33 Mimic
Level 1.00 Warlock
273/280 HP (+0.4/sec)
28/195 MP (+0.4/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 45, DEX 49, AGI 39, END 47, INT 39, WIS 40, LCK 6, MNT 3

It felt relieved. It really did not want to go back to being a Level 1. Wait, wasn't it technically a Level 1 AND a Level 15? And how can someone do two Jobs at once?!

Why did the number of questions keep increasing!?

Part Two

“Hnnnngg,” groaned the Mimic. It was gradually growing frustrated. Right now it was trying to work out the correct chant to bring up what Spells it could use. “Uhh, shells!” it yelled. Nothing happened. So far nothing had worked. “Najic!” was also a dud. It had dismissed that fateful Level Up window in haste so that it could double-check its main Status Screen. And now it was regretting that rash decision. It could no longer directly examine the unfamiliar words it saw there.

It had just learned the Shadowbolt Spell. It must have been that mass of darkness the scruffy-looking black-haired male threw it at a few times. It really wished it had paid closer attention as to what he was doing. But it was already too late - his ash pile would not offer any answers. It did absorb the Warlock Job from his corpse though. And since it learned the Spell, the Mimic knew the chant and gestures required to activate it, as well as how to target it.

But when it tried to cast it, nothing happened. So right now it was trying to find out what it was missing, just like the last time it was stumped. But the Shadowbolt entry did not appear in any of the screens and menus it was familiar with, so it was stuck. But surely there had to be some sort of list. There was a Skill List and a Job List so surely there was one for Spells, right?

“… Shell Lisht?”

[Spell List]
Ruin - Shadowbolt

“Yeshaaaaa!” it yelled in triumph. Its spidery legs did a little tap-dance for a few seconds, commemorating the occasion. If the Mimic actually had lips, they would undoubtedly be curled in a smile.

[Shadowbolt]
Requirements: Level 1 Warlock, INT 10
School: Ruin
Type: Projectile
Cost: 40 MP
Range: 25 Meters
[Effects]

Launches a volatile bolt of darkness in a specific direction.
The force of the Spell will attempt to pull apart the first solid thing it hits, then dissipate.
Grows in power in dark places or at night, dealing up to 50% more damage depending on the environment.

Unsurprisingly, there was no new information here. All of this knowledge had already been transmitted to the Mimic's mind and engraved into its memory. In a hypothetical situation where it could communicate with others, it would be able to accurately describe the Spell as a projectile from the Ruin school of magic that grew stronger in the dark. The problem was that it would then be unable to answer the obvious follow-up question:

What the crap was Ruin?!

[Ruin]
An offense-focused school of magic that boasts the strongest destructive power, commonly known as Black Magic.
Ruin Spells are unbalanced and inefficient, making them cost more MP than Spells from other schools.

And now it could say that Ruin Spells hurt a lot, but demand high MP to use. Was it really that high, though? Compared to the staggering 150 MP Cost of Cadaver Absorption, 40 almost seemed like a joke. The question was, exactly how powerful was this 'strongest destructive power?' The Mimic only had enough MP on it for, like, three casts of that Spell. Or was it four? Wait, how much max MP did it have again? It brought up the Status Screen to double-check.

It had 52/195 MP, so that was 2, 3, 4… Just short of five Shadowbolts' worth of MP. It could probably do five in a row if it waited a bit for its MP to recover between casts.

Oh.

It checked again. 53/195 MP (+0.4/sec). Now that the Mimic had a closer look, didn't it have twenty something when it first got this Warlock Job? And didn't it try to use this Shadowbolt Spell almost immediately afterwards? It knew the cost was 40 MP, but it didn't really think to check how much it had at the time. It was simply over-excited at the prospect of gaining a reusable ranged attack. It had given up after several tries and had been poring over its menus ever since.

So, now would be a good time to try again, yes? The monster switched gears and sharpened its focus. It let out a quiet guttural sound that was, in essence, the Shadowbolt chant in Mimicanese. It pictured gathering the shadows around it into a small dense lump while doing so. A fifteen centimeter wide black mass formed steadily in front of it. A thick miasma poured out of it in all directions. The dark smog-like substance lingered in the air for a brief moment before dissipating into nothing.

After about a second of that, it shouted “Shatolholt!” while simultaneously imagining the conjured chunk of darkness flying off into a specific direction. And that was indeed what happened! The Shadowbolt flew in a perfectly straight line into the distance with a small hissing noise. It reached its maximum Range of twenty-five meters in just under a second before fizzling out of existence.

The Mimic had just used its first real Spell. It did another dance for joy. Like this, it would finally be able to fight at range and also increase its Warlock Job Levels.

Any Experience Points (XP) earned through killing things would, by default, feed into the monster’s Main Job - that of a Level 15 Mimic. For it to raise its Level 1 Side Job, it had to murder stuff by doing Warlock-y type things. Like, for example, hurl lumps of eldritch darkness at its prey. If it just continued stabbing and biting everything to death, the creature’s fancy new Job would remain as little more than a Level 1 decoration.

This was the gist of the knowledge it had gleaned from its brief struggle to find out why its Shadowbolt spell failed to activate. Most of that information was given to it freely after it inspected the terms Job, Main Job, Side Job, and Job Level. It also realized that it would need to split XP between the Mimic and Warlock Jobs, but that was not necessarily a bad thing. Those rapid Level Ups were sure to be tasty in their own way. Additionally, as a shapeshifter, it fully understood the benefits of being versatile, so having a means of attacking at range was going to be a huge help.

Although it then immediately realized something. The Shapeshift Skill was, in a way, this monster’s main weapon. The legs, tentacle-tongues and even that one eye it sprouted were all possible because of this Skill. But at the same time, it had somehow ended up neglecting it. Until now, it couldn’t really morph itself while waiting in ambush. Nobody in their right mind

would assume a wiggling chest was the real thing, after all. That much it already knew by instinct.

But now was different. Now it would be taking a more active role that went against such gut feelings.

As a matter of fact, those very same instincts had steadily been getting quieter - even before its connection to the dungeon had been severed. If at first they were like a loud ear-piercing scream, right now they were closer to a murmur. It knew what they were telling it, but it could easily ignore them if it wished to do so. It wasn't actually a slave to such things, it didn't necessarily have to obey them. It was odd that it took it this long to realize that simple fact. This was probably due to the dungeon's compulsions anyway. There really wasn't much point in worrying about it now. Besides, its natural urges appealed to it at a base level, so it would still end up indulging them every now and then. The difference was it could now make the choice whether it would do that or not.

And right now, it was making the decision to improve itself. Outside of this dungeon was the complete unknown and it needed to be ready. Therefore, it would need to train up its Shapeshift Skill so that it would be better prepared. After all, the speed and range of transformations it could do went up noticeably every time the Skill Leveled Up.

For starters, now that it had sight, how about increasing its field of vision? While not as accurate as its magical perception, it was still wary of being ambushed from a distance. Those humans with their front-facing eyes were clearly idiots. If they could see towards their backs and sides without turning their heads, they might not be such easy prey. Such pitiful creatures.

Over the next several seconds, about twenty additional closed eyelids grew from the monster's wood-like shell. It needed that many to cover all possible angles it could think of, after all. Even if a few of them were redundant, it was good to have backups. When the eyelids were properly formed, it began working on the hollow eyeballs under them. Since it had already figured out the proper structure, it just needed to repeat it over and over.

[Proficiency level increased. Shapeshift is now Level 4. AGI +1. DEX +1. END +2.]

As expected, Shapeshift went up. It seemed that it would grow faster from massive changes rather than small, delicate ones. The Mimic gained quite a

bit of it while it was figuring out how to make its new legs work. Growing them just right demanded it shift a lot of its biomass around, after all. And just now it was recreating a considerable number of delicate organs on its surface.

Still, the Proficiency didn't seem to climb as rapidly as it did while the monster was creating its first eyeball. Its leg and tongue manipulation had practically stopped increasing its Proficiency altogether. Ultimately, it seemed that it would have to create new and unique things from its malleable flesh if it wanted to reach the pinnacle of shapeshifting. But that would come later.

Right now, it had finished growing its new eyes. And it opened them all at once.

[Your mind has been overwhelmed. HP -10.]
[You are Stunned for 5 seconds.]

And immediately fell on its underside. Its legs sprawled out from under it like someone had squashed it with an oversized fly swatter. Its eyelids drooped over its eyes while the magical perception was cut off. It was now in a world of complete darkness. It was unconscious.

Simply put, its fragile mind was completely unprepared for the sudden influx of information. A total of 21 eyes plus the monster's magical perception overloaded what passed for its brain. It was so harsh that it actually felt physical pain as its HP took a small hit. Even though the surroundings were almost completely pitch black to the imitation human eyes, it still proved entirely too much.

[You are no longer stunned.]

After snapping back to reality, it reflexively fluttered open its eyes. Not the wisest of decisions.

[Your mind has been overwhelmed. HP -10.]
[You are Stunned for 5 seconds.]
[A special action has been performed. MNT +1.]

It was so intense that its own body recognized it as a mental attack from the environment. And because its MNT Attribute was still low, it was completely under the influence of the Stunned abnormal condition. If its Mental Fortitude were high enough, it would be able to at least remain in a groggy,

dazed state rather than completely blacking out. Although that also meant that it would be trying to process twenty-one eyes' worth of visual information while it was Stunned. Whether it was able to close them under such conditions was another question entirely. The worst case scenario would be it becoming a prisoner in its own body. Its own perception would be overloading its brain while it could not cut off the feed. What passed for its brain would then probably leak out of its gaping mouth as it quietly passed away.

[You are no longer stunned.]

And again, its eyes opened up before its consciousness could stop them.

[Your mind has been overwhelmed. HP -10.]
[You are Stunned for 5 seconds.]

It wasn't until the loop repeated itself several more times and earned it another point of MNT that the Mimic was finally able to keep its eyes shut after waking up. Reeling from the intense something-ache, it quickly retracted all the extra eyes back inside its body. It was now back to having a single ocular organ in the middle of its front side, just under its gaping maw. If it were an actual chest, that's probably where its lock would be.

Overdoing it with the shapeshifting was clearly a bad idea. The Mimic had gotten full of itself and suffered for its stupidity. No matter how plain a creature was, it would quickly learn from such an ordeal. Painful things were painful, after all.

It would try to take things slower for the moment. Something simpler, like slightly morphing its appearance as it walked around. But how much would it need to do for it to be enough to train its Shapeshift Skill? It wasn't quite sure what counted as 'shapeshifting' and what counted as 'moving its body,' at least not until it tried things out for itself.

And so, after considering its options, the monster went to work. The treasure chest stood up on its spider legs like it was the most natural thing in the world. Its faux-wood shell began rippling and shivering slightly, almost like the surface of a puddle being disturbed by a harsh wind. It wasn't morphing into anything in particular, it just twisted its flesh around a little. After keeping an eye on its Status screen and confirming the desired Skill Proficiency did indeed go up by 1%, it was satisfied. This ought to be enough to casually raise the Shapeshift Skill as time went on, right? Yep,

sure looked that way. Then, while maintaining this state, it took a confident step forward, towards the future.

[You have suffered minor blunt trauma. HP -2.]

Which, as it would appear, was the floor. It had stumbled and face planted into the stone ground.

Shapeshifting actually took quite a bit of focus. Such a thing as ‘casually morphing its flesh’ simply wasn’t possible. It had to make a conscious effort into restructuring its own body, after all. It also disturbed its center of gravity, meaning it had even more trouble keeping balance on those six thin legs it had. Even if it could walk, it’s not like that was an automatic process that happened on its own, either.

After all, it had these legs for less than a day. The fact it could actually run and fight like that was in itself impressive. It wouldn’t be possible if it wasn’t precisely mimicking an actual spider’s actions. But in the end it was just imitating something else. It’s not like it had mastered these movements quite yet. As a result, it hit the limit on its concentration and fucked up its gait. It simply did not have the capacity to Shapeshift and walk at the same time.

So would it stay put and train or head out? Frankly speaking, it had very little desire to linger here. It felt somewhat scornful at having been almost literally chased out by its own parent. Not to mention the prey here were clearly unable to help it grow its Job Levels further. It was also slightly worried about those five identically dressed people it murdered. Everyone else it had killed, while looking similar, was still unique in some way. But that bunch felt different, like they belonged to something bigger.

Oddly enough, they reminded the Mimic of the dungeon’s giant bats. That particular breed of monster had a habit of fighting in groups. If too many of its kind were killed, the survivors would focus on escaping from battle. But rather than a surrender, this was more of a tactical retreat. They wouldn’t forgive anyone who dared to slay their kin, so if they got away they would come back minutes later with an entire flock of their friends.

It was something the Mimic had witnessed a few times as adventurers ran past it while being chased by dozens of the flying rodents. Since they were already in full sprint, the Mimic had to regrettably let them pass through its lair. It couldn’t keep up with humans that ran with all their might. If they

didn’t approach it or linger around its spot, it had no chance of getting close enough to ambush them. And those panicked individuals certainly did none of those things. After all, what sort of idiot would stop to check a treasure chest when he was about to be overwhelmed by large numbers like that?

But still, it was a scenario that was entirely possible with those shiny people. Even if none of them escaped, it was likely that their friends would come looking for them. Therefore, the Mimic would need to swiftly and surely evacuate before it was hunted down and killed. Picking itself up off the ground it scanned the distance with its one eye. It spotted the slightly lit opening that its recent quartet of victims had come from and headed off towards it. The draft it had felt earlier became more and more noticeable as it closed in on that exit.

[You have left the Litigar Dungeon Complex.]

Somewhere along the way, it was told it had officially left the dungeon once again. Not like it cared anymore at this point. Dismissing the message, it approached the narrow hole in the otherwise vast cavern. A silvery light poured in from the two meter tall and three meter wide passage. The Mimic screwed up its courage and passed through the threshold, setting foot into the wide open world for the first time.

And it saw many strange things.

The first new sight the Mimic beheld was grass. Green blades of fiber that swayed gently in the breeze. They glistened with moisture as the air shoved them around for no particular reason. They looked soft and might be pleasant to sit on, unlike that hard stone floor it was used to.

Next it saw trees. It somehow recognized them as being made of wood. After all, it was the very material it was imitating. Not to mention its teeth had crunched plenty of wooden staves and bows into splinters. Unlike steel, they weren’t hard enough to pierce the insides of its maw, so it had no trouble gobbling them up. It wasn’t a particularly tasty or nourishing material though. It just ate them to get rid of them, so it had no desire to chomp into those bland tree trunks. Those colorful bits on top of them were another story. They looked like they might taste good!

And as its gaze went up the tree, it finally beheld the night sky. It stared blankly at the black void that seemed to stretch out into infinity. Countless stars sparkled and twinkled from far, far away. The unobstructed view of a

star-filled night sky was a romantic, almost sacred thing. It was, in some ways, a shame that the denizens of this world did not take time out of their daily lives to stop and appreciate its natural beauty. Tonight was even a rare occasion when all of its moons were visible at the same time. The three celestial bodies that passed each other idly by as they hurtled through space. Their combined silver glow bathed the surroundings in an almost eerie light.

The mysteries of the cosmos seemed to spread out before the Mimic and its one lonely eye. And all it could think about was how come it was so damn bright in this new cave it had found.

Part Three

The janther was a fearsome creature. At first look it appeared to be a big cat. Its head had typical features one would expect to see in something like a mountain lion - whiskers, perky ears, pointed teeth, elongated face, soft fur and keen eyes. Its torso, too, was pretty much the same in structure, even if a bit longer than one might expect. It also had a soft-looking tail which it used to adjust its balance when running or falling.

That was, however, where the similarities ended. For one thing, its fur was dark green, bordering on black. It also grew to sizes impossible for a normal animal, easily reaching up to four meters in length from head to rump and about one hundred and fifty centimeters in height. Its most telling feature, however, was the extra pair of legs growing out right behind the front most ones. If it reared up on its hind paws, it would almost look like a two-legged, four armed creature. And every heavily muscled appendage was tipped with razor sharp claws capable of shredding people into ribbons.

It made its home in thick forests, where it could prowl and look for prey undisturbed. Hovering around Level 30 during adulthood, these big cats usually dominated the local food chain. They were also highly territorial and competitive with their own kind. A janther encroaching on another's turf was no different than a declaration of war. It wouldn't be wrong to say that each of these individuals ruled over their domain like kings or queens.

These majestic beasts were, without question, apex predators. They had an aura of undeniable strength about them, a sort of almost regal bearing befitting a powerful ruler. It was something a certain treasure chest was just now made aware of as it desperately tried to conceal its presence.

While exploring this new 'cave' called the wide world, the first living being it found was a janther. It beheld its form relaxing in a particularly old and thick tree. The green fur blended in perfectly with the tree's foliage, making it impossible to see with the naked human eye. Which was what this particular shapeshifter was using to look around. It therefore failed to notice the huge janther ahead of time.

When it walked within about ten meters of the fearsome creature, the Mimic finally detected it with its magical perception. The recently quiet instincts then screamed at it with all their might. 'Hide!' they shouted. 'Hide if you

want to live, retard!' And so it did. It immediately undid all of its mutations and once again became a perfectly unassuming chest while activating its Stealth Skill.

This was a good call, because janther whiskers were very sensitive towards mana. So something like its mystical perception, which was essentially a kind of magical sonar, made them react. The sleeping janther woke up immediately when it felt the odd disturbance, after which it heard a soft impact of something hitting the grassy ground.

In its haste, the Mimic had retracted its feet so quickly that its rectangular body fell to the ground with a soft thud. It had no choice in the matter. If the shapeshifter was any slower, its true identity would have been revealed immediately. Instead, all the janther saw when it looked down from its perch was a perfectly normal wooden treasure chest.

A rectangular pile of wood with steel edges which had appeared out of nowhere in the middle of a forest. This was not, in fact, as 'normal' as the Mimic thought it was. How could it possibly know that chests did not exist in the wilderness? Still, even if it realized it now, it was far too late. The huge cat had leaped down from its perch and was currently sniffing at the chest. That faint presence it felt just a moment ago disappeared almost completely, but it was still definitely there. As expected, something about this box unsettled it, but the beast had trouble figuring out what it was. That resulted in a sort of stalemate between the two.

A stalemate of ignorance, that is.

The Mimic kept observing the huge predator with its magical perception, unaware that its gaze was the reason for its current predicament. The janther, on the other hand, wasn't sure what this odd tingling in its whiskers was. The only reason it took interest in this strange pile of wood was that, quite simply, it was curious. And while the saying that 'curiosity killed the cat' seemed like it might become reality, there was simply no way that would happen.

The Mimic, objectively speaking, had no chance of victory here. The janther before it had a staggering 534 HP and more than double the Mimic's STR and AGI. It was much tougher, stronger and faster. Unlike the all-rounder Mimic Job, the specialized Big Cat Job focused only on physical Attributes. Because of that, even if the two were on equal footing, the janther would still

win in a straight fight. It was a species well suited to combat, unlike its theoretical opponent. On the other hand, if the Mimic had managed to land a surprise attack, it would have a decent chance of taking down the bigger creature.

But all that was a ‘what if’ scenario. The ‘what is’ scenario was one where the janther would have an overwhelming victory no matter what the box did. The gap in Levels was simply too high. And while strategy and experience might have been able to compensate for that, the Mimic had neither of those things right now. At least, nothing it could use against a creature it had just seen for the first time.

So what would this self-proclaimed king do when it found a suspicious object in its territory? Why, claim it as its own of course! Whatever this thing was, it was clearly inside its domain. Yet it smelled like it belonged to someone else. In actuality, that smell was what bothered the six-legged monster the most. So, after turning its body to the side and urinating on top of the weird pile of lumber, it went up its tree and drifted off to sleep. Even if its whiskers were still tingling slightly, it wasn’t at a level where it couldn’t be ignored. The slightly foreign sensation may have woken it up since it was a light sleeper, but it was now used to it.

The freshly marked Mimic was not, as one might expect, outraged. It wasn’t feeling humiliated, nor was its pride crushed. The simple creature didn’t have things like pride, humility or shame to begin with. So what if it was covered in cat piss? Right now, it was simply glad to be alive. The big scary fuzzy thing had gone back to where it came from and the immediate danger had passed. But the crisis was far from over. Even the slightest movement on the Mimic’s part was sure to wake the big scary thing up again. Therefore, the faux-chest focused its entire being on chesting. It would be the Chestiest Chest That Ever Chested!

And so it waited. Again. It wouldn’t need to wait as long as it did last time, though. It just had to lay low until the six-legged green thing went away. Eventually the sun rose. As the Mimic felt the celestial body’s warm light for the first time in its cave-bound life, it had absolutely nothing to say about the matter. Chests didn’t speak, after all. It did quietly ponder just what was causing it, though.

Several hours after sunrise, the janther finally woke up. It yawned and stretched a bit, then just sort of lazed around its tree. It was, after all, a nocturnal creature. It wouldn't leave to hunt until early evening and would sit idly while scratching its ass until then. Truly an attitude befitting of a king.

But before any of that could happen, at some point in the early afternoon, the janther suddenly leaped down from its tree. It let out a low growl from its throat while it scanned its surroundings. The Mimic briefly wondered what caused this sudden behavior. It could have such idle thoughts since it didn't seem to be the focus of the beast's attention this time around. And, a few seconds later, it got its answer.

An arrow flew out from a nearby bush. It cut through the air at high speed, aimed squarely at the janther's eye. Its target dodged out of the way with a grace and speed that belied the size and weight of its body. The errant projectile flew over the Mimic and stuck itself in the wide tree trunk. The janther roared loudly, as if demanding whoever had the nerve to shoot at it to show themselves.

What it got in response was another arrow. Then another one. And another one. The gigantic mass of muscle and fur dodged them nimbly every time, but refused to fall for the obvious provocations. Its keen sense of smell already told it there were multiple people waiting to ambush it on the other side of that foliage. Once they realized their trap wouldn't work, the would-be assassins showed themselves.

The first ones to run out of the bush were two men. Their matching longswords, kite shields and half-plate armor all looked well used, but in good condition. Behind them was a pointy-eared elf wearing a green robe modeled to look like a one piece dress, and she was carrying a thick oaken staff. The last one to show themselves was another elf, only this one was male and held an intricately decorated longbow and was clad in a tunic and trousers made out of brown leather.

The four-man adventuring party's target was, without question, the janther. These mighty beasts were a highly profitable source of income. The eyeballs, brain, sharp teeth, liver and several other of its parts were useful to Alchemists and Enchanters, but the pelt was the most valuable of them all.

They all fetched a good price because it was a rare monster that not everyone living in these parts could take down.

In addition to all that, this particular beast was already responsible for attacking several merchant caravans. Its infamy earned it a sizable bounty, which was what these four were aiming to collect. The thrill of a double jackpot like this was too enticing. And even if their Levels were still short of reaching 20, they had the strategy and teamwork necessary to take down the tougher opponent. There was strength in numbers, after all.

The Mimic, which was just kind of sitting there, hesitated as to what to do. The janther had leaped out of range of its magical perception some time ago. It had no idea what was going on nearby, but it definitely knew something was happening. It could clearly hear the sounds of battle, after all. So would it flee or stay put? After a while, it decided it needed to at least verify the situation before making any rash decisions. It sprouted an eye on its left side, taking extra care to disguise the eyelid with a layer of wood-textured skin. It knew for certain there was nobody within ten meters of it, so it was confident the tiny abnormality on its surface would not be noticed. When it was ready, it timidly peeked at what was going on.

It saw that indomitable janther bleeding heavily from its front. One of its eyes had been wounded. Its chest and front most legs were covered in cuts and several arrows were stuck in its side. In truth, even if it appeared heavily injured, none of those wounds were particularly deep, let alone fatal. The eye was a bit of a problem, but it would grow back given time. Therefore, at least for the time being, it could keep attacking as fiercely as possible.

The giant cat-like creature swung its two left front paws at the black-haired Warrior. The man blocked both of them with his kite shield, but was sent flying backwards from the impact. He fell a few meters away from it, coughing up blood from the heavy impact. The other Warrior, a brown haired and stocky man, took his place. The elven Druid in the back then chanted “Rejuvenate!” as she completed her Spell. A soft green light engulfed the wounded black-haired man and began refilling his HP. “Entangle!” she continued. Green plants that looked like barbed roots burst from the ground. They coiled themselves around all four of the janther’s front limbs, pinning it in place. It struggled to break free, but that would take some time.

Taking this opportunity, the Ranger nocked an arrow. He concentrated for a brief moment and then let loose with a shout of “Multishot!” The Martial Art activated splendidly. The single arrow multiplied into four the instant it was fired. The quartet of arrows struck the immobile janther’s right flank, causing it to yelp in pain. In the next instant it finished breaking free of the roots and slammed into the brown-haired Warrior in a fit of rage. It was a repeat of a little while ago as one Warrior was knocked back and the other intercepted the monster in his stead.

This was a scene the Mimic was familiar with. The ones in front would keep the enemy busy and block their advance. Then there would be that one person in the back who applied healing magic and disrupted the tougher opponent. And finally, there would be someone even further away attacking from a distance. The shapeshifting chest knew this formation well - it had faced it several times in the past. While it did prefer solo targets, the adventurers who explored dungeons completely alone were few in number. It often had to fight groups of two or three, sometimes four of them so it knew first-hand just how effective that basic strategy was. Even those four it killed last night tried to do pretty much the same thing. If it didn’t have the advantages of a higher Level or the element of surprise, it would probably not be alive right now.

The Mimic did not know much, but it knew two things were certain. One - the janther would probably lose. It couldn’t land a telling blow on those well armored people in the front and that green-haired woman would not allow them to die from accumulated damage. The second thing was that the healer - in this case the Druid - was the lynchpin of this formation. These adventurers would either get wiped out or at the very least suffer casualties without her support.

Objectively speaking, the Mimic was really just a bystander in all this. It had no obligations to help either side and would be justified if it chose to stay completely out of this mess. While it was true that adventurers and monsters were fated to be enemies, it was also true that different species of monsters very rarely got along. This was a situation where the enemy of its enemy was still an enemy. So in some ways, it didn’t matter at all who would win.

But that was not entirely true, was it? If the janther won, it would simply go back to sleep or run off to hunt. If the adventurers won, they would want to open the mysterious chest that this formidable creature was ‘guarding.’ And

with its true nature inevitably revealed, the Mimic would be dragged into a fight, at which point it would probably be killed. After all, a group capable of taking down that huge beast would surely not fall prey to something like an animate chest.

The Mimic began to weigh its options. Could it escape right now? Definitely. Neither of these two forces would be able to chase after it while they were busy with each other. So why not try to kill a few of those people first? At the very least, if it had to choose, it would want the janther to win. True, it did piss all over the poor thing, but the Mimic didn't particularly hate it. It was warm and sort of pleasant, actually. Of course, it might think differently if it had a sense of smell or if some of it got into its mouth.

Having made its decision to interfere, it next needed to choose a method. Shadowbolt was an option. What better place to test its power? It even had the perfect target - that Druid in the middle. The Mimic was in her blind spot and had a clear shot. Not to mention that, unlike the other three who constantly orbited around their target, the female elf had to stand perfectly still while chanting.

Oh, right. Chanting. It would need to chant the Shadowbolt Spell out loud, possibly attracting attention to itself. Still, with all that commotion, it doubted it would be caught as long as it was quiet. It was still under the effects of its Stealth Skill, after all. That meant any sound, including its 'speech,' would be lessened to some degree.

Right, now all that was left was to choose the right moment. The janther was rapidly running out of HP and the adventurers were clearly getting tired, but the winner was pretty much obvious at this point. The climax of the battle would be here soon and there might not be a good chance if it waited too long. And then, one of the Warriors was blown back again. The Druid would now undoubtedly focus on healing her teammate and would be a sitting duck.

The chest lid lifted ever so slightly. A low gurgle-like sound could barely be heard as it charged its Spell. When the Druid started muttering an incantation of her own, the Mimic released its Spell with a whisper.

"Shatolholt."

The mass of darkness streaked through the air with a low hiss. The female Druid had just finished preparing her next Rejuvenation Spell and was about

to invoke it with the keyword. She shouted “Re-,” but only got as far as the first syllable. The Shadowbolt caught her completely off guard and made impact with the side of her skull.

The sprawling shadow engulfed her head in an instant. The eldritch energies then viciously pulled her flesh and bones apart. There was a horrible sloshing sound as her head burst open like a gory firework. Drops of blood, bits of brain, clumps of hair, shards of bone and patches of skin rained down on her comrades. The suddenly headless body stood upright for an impossibly long second before falling over with a wet thud.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 200% more damage. Target HP -126.]
[You have slain your target in a single strike. Assassination Proficiency increased.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Arcane Assassin.]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 5 Warlock! INT +10. MNT +10. END +10.]
[You have learned a new Spell: Ebonfire.]
[You have learned a new Spell: Mass Panic.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Monster Magic.]
[Proficiency level increased. Ruin Mastery is now Level 2. INT +4. WIS +2. END +2.]

Chapter Three
The Sweeper

Part One

Lylandros never wanted much out of life. Just to become really famous and get all the ladies. A simple, straightforward dream. But as an elf born in the human-dominated Lodrak Empire, his prospects were bleak. Practically non existent, actually. He was so low on the social ladder that even the worms in the dirt seemed to be above him in the pecking order. All because of some big war over four hundred years ago that people were still salty about.

Well, it didn't help that the elves used horrific and underhanded means to fight that war. They were basically terrorists. And then they lost. Even if it was a long time ago, those random attacks on uninvolved civilians caused some pretty deep scars. It was to the point where there wasn't a single human in the Empire who hadn't suffered at their hands. So the humans despised the elves. They taught their children to hate them, and those children passed that on. It had gotten a bit better for the elves with time, but the discrimination was still pretty widespread. At least they weren't chained and enslaved on sight anymore, so there's definitely progress, right?

And then you have this young elven street urchin who wanted to make it big. What was he supposed to do? Join an adventurer's guild, of course. Unlike the general populace, most adventurers did not discriminate against elves. Or at least, not openly. As a result, many elves were forced to take up the dangerous work of an adventurer.

At least 25% of adventurers were elves, second only to humans who made up about 40% of the total. Dwarves came in third with a share of about 15%. Those short and bearded humanoids weren't discriminated against, though. It was just that most of them preferred to become artisans and artists, a much better use of their dexterous fingers and deeper reserves of stamina. Also their short legs made traveling long distances on foot a pain in the ass.

And so, Lylandros became an adventurer. That was about a month ago. He was steadily climbing up to becoming a Level 20 Ranger along with his team. They were all former street rats like him, so they shared a certain bond beyond mere colleagues. Since their moralities and values lined up, they became fast friends and their teamwork was top-notch. Something like taking down a janther was not a big deal - they had already killed one of the beasts a week ago. Admittedly it was a younger one at only Level 24, but the

method to fight it did not change. They made a decent amount of money from that kill. And then they noticed there was a tempting bounty on this particular janther worth 500 Gold Pieces (GP), so it was only natural they would go for it.

Admittedly, the traps he placed proved to be useless. It seemed that, unlike the younger one, this adult would not recklessly chase them down. Still, that just meant the hunt would take longer. They still considered this a low-risk high-reward job. The risk seemed to disappear as they verified the janther was weaker than they expected. It was practically already dead and Raela still had a decent amount of MP left. So then, why did her head have to suddenly explode just now?

Lylandros was this close to getting inside her pants, too! Such a shame. He would have to find someone else to help him graduate from being a virgin by the look of things. But before that, he had one important matter to take care of.

He had to throw up. He keeled over and went “Urk.. Urp! UGHRAHRAHRAHRA!” as the contents of his stomach came out the wrong end. It wasn’t like the poor lad could help it - he was still young and inexperienced. He was also right next to Raela when he saw her head suddenly enveloped in a black mist. He opened his mouth to scream, but in the next instant that pretty face had turned into soup. And then he got a mouthful of bloodied brain tissue. He also briefly felt the presence of someone else’s tooth on his tongue.

So he threw up. He vomited uncontrollably because his heart was gripped by a combination of fear, panic, disgust and general what-the-fuck-ery. Brom and Krom didn’t seem to realize what had just happened. The horrifying noise of their comrade’s head bursting into a red mist was drowned out by the janther’s roars. But even if the sound reached them, it was unlikely they would hear it. Those muscle-headed sworn brothers were so focused on their target that they didn’t notice anything else.

But Lylandros did. How could he not? He saw that sinister Spell flying at Raela, but he couldn’t stop it. He didn’t know who launched it, but he saw the direction. And so, while his comrades were in the middle of trading blows with an enemy they were highly unlikely to defeat, he looked aside. And then he saw… it.

A mass of wood, teeth and hatred. It was skittering quickly across the grassy ground on black, spider-like legs. It lowered its profile and circled around to the janther's back, using the six-legged beast's body as a shield. Krom and Brom had yet to notice it.

This was bad. He didn't know why or how, but that spider-chest was definitely the culprit that murdered the girl he liked. He couldn't let it get away with that! He wouldn't allow that monster to do as it pleased! This time would be different. This time, he would do his job as the eyes and ears of this team and warn them of danger. He opened his mouth and vomited furiously in their direction!

He couldn't even scream properly. All that was heard was the wet splatter of disgusting bits of partially digested meat against the grass. It wasn't like he was quite over what had happened seconds ago. But he tried again. He lifted his gaze to try to warn his surviving comrades. But it was a mistake. What he saw next would undoubtedly give him nightmares for the rest of his life.

Part Two

The Mimic had made a decision. It would interfere in this fight and test out its new Shadowbolt Spell in the process. The one-hit K.O. against the Druid was unexpected, however. It had no idea Assassination worked with Spells, either. If it did, it would have aimed for somewhere else. After all, without the brain, it couldn't absorb that corpse. Well, it was still going to eat it, though. Truthfully, it was feeling rather hungry. Its HP and MP recovery weren't halved due to starvation, but that moment felt like it would come soon.

It had other things to do before chowing down, though. First, it needed to finish the fight. And it would do so by killing off the janther and then moving onto the heavily wounded and tired adventurers. Truly a lose-lose-win scenario that suited it perfectly! It crept around the janther's back while under the guise of Stealth. It noticed one of the adventurers was watching it, but couldn't do anything about that. The Stealth Skill only affected sound, so walking around in plain sight like that was bound to get it discovered. It didn't matter though, as long as its target was unaware.

Once it got into position, the Mimic took out a single sword and gripped it tightly with its tongue. Its sudden burst of INT and WIS seemed to make it realize the janther had an obvious weak spot that was perfect for Assassination. It was a specific organ that was also present on the humans and elves it had already eaten. And its recent tussle with the quintet of guards back in that cave demonstrated that it was undoubtedly a weakness. So, after taking some precautions and matching its timing with the still-fighting janther, it brandished its sword and stabbed at it from behind. Using its magic perception and dexterous tongue, it precisely pierced both of the janther's testicles.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 200% more damage. Target HP -54.]

The damage dealt was low. That much was expected. It wasn't like something that was outside the body was a vital spot. Well, it may have been necessary to the janther to qualify as a mammal, but the beast had other things on its mind right now. Like a searing, indescribably intense pain. It

still had 105 HP remaining, but the agony it was in made it almost want to die.

It yelled with a long, high-pitched scream as it fell on the ground. Krom and Brom stepped back at this weird behavior. Since it didn't look like the writhing and yelling janther would get up any time soon, they could finally catch their breath. But something was off - where was their damned support? They looked over their shoulders in unison to admonish their teammates for slacking. It was only then that they realized something horrible had happened. Their Ranger was vomiting and their Druid was lying on the ground, covered in blood.

And then the janther screamed again. Krom and Brom turned their focus back to their target. If they turned their backs on it now, it was sure to kill them both. And then, they also saw it. A wooden chest that was latched firmly on the janther's back.

The Mimic had climbed up on the now grounded prey and driven its teeth deep into it. It stuck to it like a tick. Even if the janther thrashed around it wouldn't be able to shake it off. The Mimic then put the next step of its attack into action - its six spider legs fused together to become two slightly disfigured black arms. It was its first time growing human limbs, but it had no problems with that. It had eaten so many arms that it could probably create one in its sleep. It wasn't like the arachnid limbs that had to be made from sight, or the eye which was a delicate thing. Simple muscle-and-bone could be easily grown in an instant.

The arms reached into the small opening between the monster's jaws and the janther's bloodied hide and pulled out a sword each. They then began viciously stabbing every bit of janther flesh within reach. The shapeshifter couldn't put as much as power into them as it wanted, but it had all the time in the world. It kept stabbing and carving up the green fur, splattering blood all over the place.

The duo of warriors felt like they had walked into a nightmare. Their elven comrade further back felt like he was already in hell. Even by monster standards, that horrible wooden box was simply way too vicious, entirely too brutal. It was as though it went out of its way to pick the most horrible method of ripping apart its victims.

Once the janther finally stopped struggling and passed away, the Mimic morphed again. In an instant it turned back into a spider-chest, but this time it had all three of its tongue-tentacles out and ready. Without giving the dumbfounded men any time to relax it charged at them, swinging its blades around in a flurry of death and blood.

Krom and Brom were natural-born Warriors. They were confident in their ability to block and parry a wide range of attacks. Whether they came from monsters, bandits or even other adventurers didn't matter - they would deflect them all and hold the line. However, they could not keep up with this onslaught. The sheer number of blows raining down on them meant they had no breathing room. Exhausted and disheartened, they desperately tried to hold the monster back while getting covered in scratches. But they still had faith. Faith that, if given enough time, that elf would be able to do something about this nightmarish creature. They believed that from the bottom of their hearts.

But such a thing did not happen. Lylandros was already running away with all his might. His elven nature screamed at him to save himself. His experience growing up in the gutter told him to run for his life. And his fear-addled mind had absolutely no desire to stick around. And so, he ran. Comrades? Lovers? Friends? You can buy plenty of those if you had money! But you couldn't have any of that if you died in a forest somewhere.

Besides, he had a duty. He had to report the appearance of that terrifying monster to the authorities. The proper subjugation Quest needed to be put out and stronger adventurers had to be called in from the south. Dying there would be a disservice to his comrades who were still fighting to buy him time to escape.

At least, that was what he told himself.

Back at that blood-soaked battlefield, Krom and Brom were both inevitably slain. They fought valiantly, but they were in a hopeless position. Wounded, tired and abandoned, they died to a monster's blade slowly, painfully, and gripped by despair. Their passing was so dreadful, that it was highly likely they would come back as the undead if their killer wasn't planning on absorbing their corpses.

The Mimic danced on their bloodied bodies. Its hastily-made plan resulted in a massive harvest. Since someone else had already heavily wounded the

janther before this opportunist showed up and stole the kill, it only got partial credit. Still, that, combined with the other two kills it got, was enough to earn it three Levels for its Mimic Job. The pointy-eared one got away, which was a bit of a shame, but all things considered this was a very profitable engagement.

After it had settled down, it went over to the non-viable corpse and began eating the dead woman. While it was doing that, it also went through its Status. It had earned a lot of things it didn't have time to double check before, so now was a good time to verify. And just like the Spell List, that new thing it saw should have its own screen. It still had no idea what exactly a Perk was, though.

[Perk List]
Arcane Assassin
Monster Magic

[Perk]
A special effect that had been made available by fulfilling specific conditions.
You can Inspect individual Perks for more information.

[Arcane Assassin]
Every assassin worth their salt knows that silence is golden.
Requirements: Kill an opponent of equal or higher Level with a single Spell while the Stealth Skill is active.
[Effects]
Spells cast while the Stealth Skill is active will be completely silent.
Spells cast while the Stealth Skill is active will cost 25% more MP.

[Monster Magic]
A being born of mana is naturally more skilled at manipulating it.
Requirements: Obtain any Level 5 Caster Job as a Monster.
[Effects]
All Spells are 5% more effective.

So Perks were similar to Skills, except they wouldn't grow stronger with time. Obtaining them seemed to be mostly at random, too. How was anyone supposed to figure it out outside of blind luck?! The Mimic complained slightly to nobody in particular. Well, not like it had a firm grasp on how to unlock General Skills either.

Truthfully, adventurers could share this information and help each other become that slight bit stronger. They were all essentially competitors, so they only revealed such things to those they trusted. And nobody was about to trust a monster that was currently busy eating the corpse of a person it murdered in cold blood.

Next, the Mimic needed to verify its new magic.

[Ebonfire]
Requirements: Level 3 Warlock, INT 20
School: Ruin
Type: Targeted
Cost: 100 MP
Range: 25 Meters
[Effects]
Engulfs your target's soul in flames, burning away their body over 6 seconds.
Has no effect on Undead, Demons and Golems.

[Mass Panic]
Requirements: Level 5 Warlock, INT 15, MNT 15
School: Domination
Type: Area Effect
Cost: 50 MP
Range: 5 Meters
[Effects]
Sends all living things in the immediate area into a magically-induced panic attack.
Has no effect on Undead, Demons and Golems.

Ebonfire seemed to be like a powerful spell, but with limited usage and 100 MP also seemed like a really steep cost. On the upside, it looked like it left the actual body in one piece, which was good. The Mimic didn't want to invalidate any more corpses if it could help it.

As for Mass Panic, it seemed to be of limited use. It was also of a school of magic different to Ruin.

[Domination]
A school of magic that focuses on influencing the mind.
Domination Spells do not deal physical damage and instead cause

debilitating conditions.
Domination Spells will display stronger or weaker effects depending on the difference between the mental Attributes of the caster and the target.
Repeated use of Domination Spells against the same target will show reduced effectiveness.

So it was something that seemed completely unreliable, at least for hunting. This was the simple truth the Mimic's noticeably boosted mental abilities realized. Still, the incantation was really short so it might be useful as an escape mechanism. Having finished devouring the Druid, the Mimic moved onto the janther's corpse. While it would definitely use Cadaver Absorption on it, the monster first needed to rectify a problem - it couldn't see in the dark. But this six-legged beast could clearly see it last night.

Therefore, the Mimic wanted those eyes. It had to eat them to copy them properly. Technically, eating a part of the corpse now would reduce the effectiveness of Cadaver Absorption, but some things were more important than Attributes or Skills. And even then, it was only going after that one tiny part of its face. Compared to the rest of the gigantic body, they were so insignificant that it probably wouldn't make a difference anyway. So the shapeshifter gouged them out slowly with a sword and then put them in its mouth. It rolled them around on its tongue before slowly chewing them up and swallowing them.

The sole human eye on its surface then morphed. Its color changed from a dull brown to a bright yellow. A vertical line ran down the golden iris, giving it the appearance of a cat eye. The Mimic would need to wait until it got dark again to properly calibrate it, but it was a start. Since it had enough MP, it absorbed the entirety of the janther. What appeared to be thousands of liters of gray sludge disappeared inside its body, leaving behind a pile of skin and bones that crumbled away slowly in the gentle breeze.

Unfortunately, it was a failure and nothing was gained. The Mimic immediately felt a pang of regret. Hundreds of kilograms of delicious fresh meat just went to waste. It might actually mourn for it, if it knew the concept of grief. Still, it had two more usable corpses it could absorb, so it might get lucky anyway. But that would need to wait until its MP recovered some more. Right now it had one more important piece of business with its Status Screen.

“Skill Lisht: Harlock” it chanted. The screen came up as expected, but it seemed it only had one Skill on offer. This was because, simply put, it was missing supporting General Skills. For example, if it had the Taboo Skill, it might unlock Hexcraft. But as it stood, it had to make do with what it got.

[Summon Familiar]
The Warlock can call forth demons from the Beyond and bend them to his will.
Requirements: Level 5 Warlock, INT 30
Type: Active
Activation Time: 10 seconds
Cost: 50% of max MP
Range: 15 meters
[Effects]
Summons a contracted demon to serve as the Warlock’s familiar and obey his orders.
A summoned Familiar will last until it dies or the Warlock dismisses it.
The Familiar’s strength is dependent on the Level of this Skill and the MP used to summon it.
Allows the creation of 1 demonic contract.
Beware! Demons do not like to be shackled!

Having some company would be good. Not that the Mimic was getting lonely or anything, it just understood the concept of strength in numbers. And if that didn’t work, it would at least find out if demons tasted good.

[General Information]
Mimic (Lesser), Genderless, 2 months old
Level 18.56 Mimic
Level 5.62 Warlock
178/376 HP (+0.6/sec)
35/305 MP (+0.4/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 51, DEX 56, AGI 45, END 65, INT 61, WIS 49, LCK 12, MNT 24

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 4.43
Storage - Lvl 3.61
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 2.40

[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar - Lvl 1.00
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 4.31
Stealth - Lvl 3.61
Sword Mastery - Lvl 5.15
Ruin Mastery - Lvl 2.87

Part Three

Lylandros never wanted much out of life. Just to become really famous and get all the ladies. A simple, straightforward dream. But that was then, and this was now. Thoughts of fame and fortune were so far removed from his consciousness that he questioned if he really had them in the first place.

“Oy, twiggy,” came a voice from outside his cell. “The cap’n will see you now.”

Lylandros meekly got up from the pile of hay that served as his bed for the night. Not like he could fall asleep anyway. His night terrors wouldn’t let him. The horrifying scenery of that girl he sort of liked exploding all over him was still fresh in his mind. He remembered it vividly like it was yesterday. Although that’s not really surprising considering that’s precisely when that happened.

He ambled over to the iron bars that made up his cell door and put his hands through a gap in the vertical bars. The guard on the other side cuffed the elf’s wrists with solid iron shackles connected by a short, thick chain. Lylandros pulled his wrists back inside so that the guard could unlock and open the cell. He roughly grabbed the shackled elf by the arm and almost literally dragged him off.

This all happened so smoothly and methodically, onlookers might have mistaken it for a well-rehearsed play. It was just that, like most small-time hoodlums, Lylandros was no stranger to being locked up. His captors would insult and manhandle him all the time, so this treatment was nothing new.

Truth be told, he was actually glad to be in here. It was safe and quiet. They even confiscated his soiled clothes and armor. The elf would probably never see those again, but that was undoubtedly a good thing for his peace of mind. Right now, the only thing he was wearing was a pair of rough, ragged trousers that did little more than preserve his dignity. The brown cloth was so rough and riddled with holes that it wouldn’t be a surprise if these pants were sewn together from old potato sacks.

The armed guard roughly escorted him through the damp, rat-infested dungeon. About a dozen tiny jail cells much like his own dotted the dark corridor. Wall-mounted torches illuminated the thick walls made out of hewn stone. Intermittent cries from the other prisoners could be heard echoing

around him. Lylandros and the jailer eventually reached the steep staircase that was the only way in or out of this depressing place. They climbed up out of the dungeon and into the keep proper.

The walls looked pretty much the same, but at least there were windows here. Lylandros was guided through several corridors, up some more steps and finally arrived at the office of the local guard captain. His escort rapped twice on the thick wooden door. After hearing the “Come in,” he opened it and dragged his prisoner inside, throwing him roughly onto the floor.

“Hey, come on!” complained the captain. He was a slightly plump, balding man way past his prime. He stood up from behind the heavy desk in the middle of the room. “Don’t do that! You’ll stain the carpet!”

“Sorry, sir,” said the guard. “This one was rather violent yesterday, so I-”

“Enough! I don’t care! Just put him in the damn chair so I can interrogate him.”

The grunt replied with a simple “Yes, sir,” before picking up the scrawny elf by the armpit and putting him in the simple wooden chair next to the desk.

The captain eyed the prisoner up and down. He looked like the typical hoodlum elf - lanky, hollowed out face and several scars from various stab wounds. He was certain he had whip tracks over his back as well, but that was unimportant.

This particular street rat had entered this city yesterday afternoon. Well, ‘entered’ was perhaps too strong a word. He ran up to the city gates covered in blood and started screaming something about explosions, brains and a ‘horrible monstrosity.’ Since he caused a disturbance and refused to calm down, the guards at the scene subdued and incarcerated him.

It was the same day that the big incident at the nearby dungeon complex was discovered. Captain Reeves knew better than to assume it to be a coincidence. Although it took some time for him to go through all the reports, his experience told him this elf and the disappearance of his patrol were somehow linked.

When the five man unit failed to report back on time, Reeves had sent in a contingent of thirty guards to look for them. And they had made several extremely worrying discoveries.

First, they found four piles of clothed ashes. Former adventurers by the look of it. The dog-tags recovered from the remains revealed their names as well as which guild they belonged to. Using that information, the guards learned these four were on their way to the Yellow Zone of the complex. That meant they weren't total newbies and were between Level 5 and 10. Otherwise they would have stuck to the Green Zone or moved onto the Red Zone that went up to Level 15.

The second clue the investigation uncovered was on the way to the quarantined area of the Green Zone. The walls and floor of a particular tunnel were bathed in dried up blood. Dead monsters and their bodily fluids would be absorbed back into the dungeon as a form of mana recycling. This meant this particular blood came from those outside of the dungeon's influence. And judging by the bloodied pieces of armor that had been discarded all over the place, it came from Reeves's patrol.

The third and perhaps most worrying thing was that the quarantine itself had been breached. His guards brought back the circular portion of enchanted steel that had been neatly cut through. This degree of precision and power was way beyond everything the veteran officer had ever seen. The dwarf responsible for putting that grate together claimed it would take something that was well over Level 70 to make that sort of cut.

Or someone, Reeves thought. Several high-leveled elven terrorists were still at large. This sort of sabotage was clearly within their abilities and lined up with their MO. He theorized they had heard about the appearance of a Sweeper and cut it loose to spread terror among the populace. The captain estimated the Sweeper itself was a threat between Level 20 and 30. If it were any weaker, it wouldn't be able to kill that Necromancer or take down five of his guards at once. If it were any tougher, it would have broken through the steel grate with sheer force within days rather than two weeks later.

And now, this suspicious elf was in his office. His background check revealed he joined his guild as an initiate only recently. That was good enough reason to assume he wasn't the one who sabotaged the quarantine. After all, things like adventurers 'hiding their true powers' was impossible. The organizations known as guilds had all their members undergo routine Appraisal inspections to track their growth and progress. If a Level 70 no-name appeared out of nowhere and offered to join a guild, it would cause a

huge uproar. They definitely wouldn't leave such a person as a mere initiate - doing so would be disrespectful to their more senior members.

Still, Lylandros's guild refused to tell Reeves anything other than the elf's rank within their organization. All guilds collected and recorded information concerning the Jobs, Attributes and Skills of all their members. However, that was kept strictly confidential. Requests to release that data to people like Reeves were reviewed on a case-by-case basis and usually declined. It wasn't unheard of for adventurers to become criminals, but their guilds needed more than mere suspicion to comply with such demands.

Then again, even the fact he was an initiate was good enough for Reeves - it was more than he usually got out of those people. It was also sufficient grounds to dismiss this elf as the main perpetrator, though he could still be an accomplice.

After sorting his thoughts, the captain began the interrogation. He asked the man's name, age and occupation for the record, then inquired about the events of yesterday's afternoon. The elf answered his questions without holding anything back. He spoke of their janther hunt, of his comrade's sudden and violent demise, of how the 'horrible creature' tortured their quarry to death and finally how he ran screaming for his life. The way he spoke about such terrible events with a flat monotone and vacant, fish-like eyes left little doubt in the captain's mind. The young man before him was broken by what he had witnessed.

"Thank you," said the captain, concluding the interrogation. "Private, show this man back to his cell. Gently this time. I mean, for real, be gentle. It's not some euphemism to rough him up, okay?"

The guard saluted with a "Yes, sir!" before turning to his prisoner. "Come on, twiggy, up you go!" he beckoned. He lifted him by his shoulder and led the man outside the captain's office.

"Oh!" exclaimed Reeves. "Send word to Sergeant Hargan that I need to speak with him when you're done."

The guard nodded with another "Yes, sir," then slammed the door shut.

Now left alone, Reeves let out a long, tired sigh. "Fuck this," he cursed and reached over to one of his desk drawers. He pulled out a bottle of wine, uncorked it and took a mouthful straight from the bottle. He was gradually

becoming an alcoholic over the last several weeks. All because of this damned Sweeper.

A Sweeper was a term used to describe a particular abnormality within a dungeon. A monster that had broken way past the Maximum Monster Level. It would roam the dungeon and annihilate everyone and anyone it came across. Isolating and quarantining the Sweeper so that it died of starvation was one way of dealing with it. The worst, laziest, cheapest way. It fit that idiotic mayor perfectly. If he had listened to Reeves and approved a proper subjugation Quest immediately, then things would be different. His men and who knows how many others would still be alive.

He took another swig of the bottle.

After all, very few adventurers stuck around this province once they reached Level 20 or so. The few who did were 'retirees.' Adventurers who did easy Quests way below their pay grade so they could live peacefully and humbly. A lot of his guards were 'retired' adventurers around Level 15, too. Many of them were simply disillusioned when their childish dreams crashed into the impenetrable wall called reality. They had given up and settled down. *It's not a bad way to live life*, thought Reeves before swallowing yet another mouthful of wine.

But now, he would have to take action. He would put his foot down. Although he would still send an armed patrol to scout out the janther's lair and confirm the elf's story, he was more or less convinced. The Sweeper had broken — no, had been set free from the quarantine and was running amok in the nearby forests. Judging from Lylandros's disheartened babbling, it seemed to be a type of Mimic. Since it clearly had access to some form of magic on top of being particularly vicious, Reeves made another conclusion. This Sweeper was a variant or rare species that had appeared in the nearby dungeon. Most likely it was summoned by this phantom saboteur to spread fear and terror among the populace. It was a common strategy of the elves during the big war, so it was entirely possible.

Later that day, Sergeant Hargan returned with the results of his investigation. Reeves had sent him to scout out the site of Lylandros's battle with the janther. The sergeant reported three piles of ash being present at the scene. Two of them were wrapped in clothes and armor and the third one was much

too big to be a person. There was no sign of a headless corpse, but he did locate a huge day-old blood smear on the grass.

That settles it, thought Reeves. The Sweeper was definitely at large in that forest. He gave the order to assemble a punitive force to subjugate the threat. The minimum Level required was 20 and the monetary compensation would be split up between the participants based on merit. As for the reward itself, the total amount came out to a formidable 860 GP. It was a sizable sum that would allow a regular person to party it up for a whole six weeks. That or live off it for almost a year if they were frugal. Even if it had to be split up between several people, it was still an extremely attractive prize for a day's work.

The captain didn't want to deal with that scumbag of a mayor, so he put the reward together himself. Most of this money came from the 500 GP set aside for the janther bounty that was now void. The remaining 360 GP was collected from soldiers in the barracks. Word had spread among the tightly-knit City Guard that the subjugation target was the same bastard that murdered five of them. Some who were over Level 20 volunteered. Most who couldn't or didn't participate directly gave freely of their own pockets. A larger reward would mean an increase of both quantity and quality of adventurers willing to take the Quest. It was their own way of taking vengeance for the death of their friends and colleagues.

And so, about four days later, a force of twenty-three people was gathered. Eight of those were guards. The remaining fifteen people were adventurers. As per the Quest requirements, they were all at least Level 20, reaching up to Level 27 in a few cases. This was the best they could gather on such short notice, but time was of the essence. They needed to stamp out that Sweeper before it became too big a threat. The near-two-dozen men and women were gathered outside the city gates, eager to set off. Reeves appeared on horseback and in full ceremonial armor and stood in front of them. He raised his arm to quiet the murmuring and began the briefing.

"Thank you all for coming. I will now reveal what we know of the Sweeper. Its species is suspected to be a Mimic variant. We estimate its Level to be in the higher 20s, possibly lower 30s."

Most of the adventurers found this news odd. The fact that this many people were gathered for one lousy box was, in a word, overkill. Some of the

adventurers let out an amused snort while others threw the captain a look that said ‘What, that’s it?’ Reeves read the casual mood and immediately took action to dispel it.

“This is not, as you might think, overkill,” he declared. “This monster is unnaturally intelligent and vicious. It has killed at least fifty people in the last two months, possibly many more. We also have good reason to believe it can use offensive magic with deadly consequences.”

The gazes of everyone present sharpened. With this many people, even if the monster was Level 50 they could probably take it down if they worked in waves, but only if it couldn’t cast Spells. Being able to attack with magic made a monster much more dangerous than it would be otherwise. If the Level 50 monster in the previous example could use magic, then there was a good chance the punitive force would suffer heavy casualties. It might even be completely wiped out.

“We will commence a sweep of the woods. We will split into four six-man teams. Be mindful of anything even remotely box shaped, including rocks and fallen tree trunks! Look for fresh blood smears, discarded gear or piles of gray ash! If you find the monster, make sure you launch a flare immediately to notify the other teams of your position!”

The captain held up a small wooden tube. It was five centimeters in diameter and twenty centimeters long. A string came out of one end of it. Everyone present had been given one of these earlier. Those not familiar with the device were briefly taught how to use it. The instruction consisted of someone saying, “Pull the string and a shiny thing will pop out the other end, easy peasy!” One would think that much would be obvious, but the guards knew better than to expect common sense from adventurers. A few of those drifters seemed genuinely surprised that the flare-launchers were that simple to use.

“Do not get cocky and try to take it on by yourselves,” cautioned the captain. “We’ve lost too many good people to this foul beast already! If you fuck up, you won’t even leave a body behind for your bereaved loved ones to bury! Understood?!”

“Yes, sir!” came the immediate reply. The spirited response from the eight soldiers seemed to invigorate the other adventurers. They realized that, for these guards, this was no longer just a job. It was personal. And if some

pencil-pushing lazy bums were about to give this mission their all, then how could they, as professional monster hunters, possibly do any less? So what if guilds and law-enforcement didn't always see eye to eye? They were still allies in the grand scheme of things.

"Very good!" shouted the captain. "Sergeant Hargan will be taking over from here. I have given him command over this operation. Good luck, and Godspeed!" He saluted and rode off back inside the city without answering any questions. That's what Hargan was there for. Besides, the only questions the adventurers wanted to ask that captain were things like "What the hell?! You're not coming?! What was the point of the horse and fancy armor?! Why'd you even come out here in the first place, fatass!?"

Part Four

A party of five were making their way through the thick forest. Two armed guards led the way while three adventurers followed them. They were one out of four groups searching the forest for the Sweeper that had appeared recently.

“Really, what was Sarge thinking?” complained Mark.

Harold frowned at him in response. “The **sergeant** knows what he’s doing. We need those three’s abilities, but they didn’t have a vanguard. That’s our job.”

“I know that. I just… I can’t really trust people that easily. Especially that Rogue. He won’t even tell us his name!”

Harold shrugged lightly and looked over his shoulder, where the other three were following.

“Hey, buddy! What do we call you?”

The tall, slender man, who was wrapped head-to-toe in blackened leather, turned his gaze towards Harold.

“‘Buddy’ works,” he said casually. “And I don’t reveal my name because of guild policy. Occupational hazard they call it. I’m sure you understand.”

Harold turned back towards his colleague with a smirk.

“There, see? He’s Buddy.”

“Very funny, Harold.”

‘Buddy’ was part of an adventurer guild called The Dark Hand. They didn’t let anyone join unless they met the minimum requirements - Level 5 Rogue Main Job with at least Level 2 Stealth Skill. It was a den of thieves, spies and assassins. Mark wondered how such a thing could possibly be legal. And while the general populace like himself might doubt it, that guild was completely legit. There was a very high demand for their services, after all. A Rogue could disarm or set traps, pick locks, scout ahead under Stealth and murder the everliving shit out of monsters - all things that were necessary in dungeons. Even once the battle started they made themselves useful by keeping the enemy off balance. Smoke bombs, poisoned daggers, throwing

knives and all manner of other dirty tricks and tools made them reliable allies in many situations.

Buddy was a particularly promising recruit. He was a Level 21 Rogue and Level 6 Alchemist. Choosing an Artisan Job for a Side Job might seem weird, but being able to brew his own potions and poisons was a huge help. Plus, the Alchemist Job and its related Skills all raised Dexterity (DEX), Perception (PER) and, to a lesser degree, Endurance (END). A Rogue could make good use out of all three of those Attributes. The downside was that Artisan-type Jobs took a long time to train, but it was still a Side Job that matched perfectly with his Main Job.

His Status aside, he also looked the part. The tight leather bodysuit fit snugly around his arms, torso, butt and thighs. While such armor couldn't really ward off blows, a Rogue who was expecting to get hit was already a failure in his book. That's why his gear amplified his AGI, allowing him to dodge and evade rather than block and parry. His head was completely hidden - a hood and mask covered everything but his shifty eyes and sharp ears. Although exposing his ears did help a bit with his hearing, the main reason he did that was to show he wasn't an elf. He had nothing against those people personally. If anything, he was a fan of elven women. However, a significant part of his clientele were humans who hated elves. They would trust the Rogue more once they saw his ears weren't pointed.

But the thing that irked Mark the most was the Rogue's personality. Here they were, hunting a dangerous monster in the middle of the forest and what was that shady guy doing?

"I may be an honorable thief, but I believe it is your piercing stare that has stolen my heart."

He was hitting on the sole female in the group - the Witch, Xera. For the past half hour, no less.

"Aww, that's so sweet of you to say," she replied while blushing lightly.

You don't have to play along with that, screamed Mark inside his head. He had tried reprimanding them at first, but had to give up since they refused to listen to him. He let out another sigh. In his eyes, that Xera woman was the root of the problem.

The way those bright blue eyes darted all over the place while her mouth hung open was the tell-tale characteristic of a natural airhead. Her face was alluring to say the least and her waist-length blonde hair made her ooze with feminine charm. Her long, navy blue robe dragged slightly along the ground behind her. It had massive slits on either side of the skirt part, which exposed her long legs all the way up to the hip. The light fabric left her shoulders, collarbone and back bare, while wide sleeves ran the length of her arms. The fact that this ridiculous outfit even stayed in place was nothing short of a miracle.

Then there was the completely outrageous cleavage. Her breasts were absolutely massive - almost as large as her head - and swayed obscenely with every step. They pressed dangerously against the thin, low-cut garment. It was almost as if they were trying to rip it apart from the inside. If one had keen eyesight they would be able to notice the subtle outline of her nipples, which hinted at her lack of upper body underwear.

In short, she looked like a total bimbo. Her appearance and behavior were completely at odds with her claim of being a Level 27 Warlock. Mark wanted to question if that was really the case, but he knew better. Everyone here had submitted to a Basic Appraisal check to prove they fit the minimum requirements for this Quest. Questioning his superiors' ability like that would just earn him a week of cleaning toilets.

At least the last member of his group was reasonable. Koross was a Level 21 Priest, no Side Jobs. He wore sensible white robes with delicate golden embroidery around the wrists, heart and waist - garb typical of those in service to the Gods. He had a thick, dignified beard and mustache that went down to his stomach. His bald head seemed to gleam unnaturally in the sunlight. Koross was also well built, hinting that the steel mace on his hip was not just for show.

He wasn't without fault though. Koross was a dwarf. And like most dwarves, traveling with him came with two very specific problems. The first one was that he was short. His stubby legs meant he had trouble keeping up with the others and had to constantly half-jog after them. The second issue was that dwarves were really weak to the lure of alcohol. Koross was no exception. He would occasionally bring out a hip flask from inside his robe and take a swig from it. It was fine though - dwarves were of stout constitutions and needed a lot more than that to get tipsy. All things considered, the guy who

reeked of whiskey seemed way more reliable than the shifty Rogue and the ditzy Witch.

Just as Mark had rebuilt his focus on the path ahead, Xera suddenly let out an embarrassed “Nooo!” There was the sound of a slap and a yell of pain from Buddy. “I can’t do that sort of thing with you!” she continued while covering her face with both hands. It seemed that Buddy had pushed his luck a little too far.

“Will you cut that out! This is enemy territory!” shouted Mark.

He couldn’t take it anymore. Was this the sort of attitude adventurers had while on the road? Yes, actually. This was more or less how those people behaved while in transit. A guard living in a relatively peaceful city like Monotal would have no idea how stressful adventuring could get once you approached Level 30. If these people didn’t let off steam regularly, they’d implode.

“What’s your problem, man?” said Buddy while rubbing his cheek. That slap from earlier had more power behind it than it looked. “I’m properly keeping an eye out, you know?”

“Like hell you are!” shouted Mark.

“Haaah,” sighed the Rogue. This was why he hated working with civilians. “Fine, let me prove it.”

He took out a small straight knife from his belt and threw it up and to his right. It cut through the air without making a sound before hitting something in the branches of a tree. He then pulled deftly on the almost invisible steel wire, reeling the knife back into his hand. It had cleanly skewered a small brown squirrel.

“My Perception is really good, see? My ears alone can detect anything trying to sneak up on us. They can even beat a Level 4 Stealth Skill you know!”

Mark blinked a few times, processing what just happened. That man behind him had just hit a small target some twenty meters away without so much as looking at it.

“Cheh,” he clicked his tongue. “Alright, you win. Just… keep it down, will you?”

Harold expected this much already, but he too was impressed. Koross was in his drink at the moment so he missed the display entirely. Xera, however, had a different opinion on the matter.

“That poor fuzzy thing!” she wailed. “How could you!? You there, shorty! You’re a Priest, right? Can you heal this little guy?”

“Huh?! What? Who?” blurted out the startled dwarf as he hurriedly put his flask away. “Oh, a squirrel! That our lunch? Good work, lad!”

“Thanks, old timer,” replied Buddy in good humor. “But I think lunch will have to wait. I smell blood.”

“Well aye, it’s all over yer hand there.”

“No, not this,” said the Rogue before throwing the squirrel carcass to the ground. “Monster blood, it’s coming in from the east. My guess, about five hundred meters.” He pointed towards the treeline to their left. “And look,” he continued, “there’s some weird markings on the trees here. Like something was trying to take a bite out of them.”

The group stared at the tree in question. Forget trying, something had actually succeeded in taking a sizable chunk out of the thick trunk. And judging from those odd marks, it wasn’t a stretch to say they were teeth tracks.

“Should we send a flare?”

“Not yet, Koross,” said Mark. “We need to confirm it with our own eyes first.” He and Harold both unsheathed their swords and readied their shields. “Arms at the ready! We’re going to check it out!”

Buddy pulled twin daggers from the sheath at his lower back. He took out a small vial from a pouch on his hip and applied the viscous green liquid inside it to his blades. Xera’s normally vacant expression became almost unnaturally focused. She seemed like a completely different person. She reached over her shoulder and took the heavy wooden staff out of its leather sling, gripping it tightly with both hands.

The Rogue studied the staff curiously. The upper end of the wood curved like the letter C and had a purple crystal ball that floated inside the half-circle. It looked fancy. Expensive. How come he didn’t notice it earlier? Ah,

probably because it was behind Xera's back while her voluptuous breasts were, as expected, on her chest.

Koross was already holding his mace in his right hand, while his left reached into his robes. Only this time, instead of a flask, he took out a small black book - the Scripture of the Sun. He went down on one knee and put the book to his forehead. He mumbled something under his breath before finishing the chant with "Blessing of the Sun!" Everyone present started glowing with a faint yellow light. A few seconds later, it faded away.

[You are now under the effects of Sun's Blessing. Maximum HP +120.]
[The effect will last for 60 minutes or until it is overridden by another Blessing.]

"Pheeeww," whistled Buddy. "Not bad, old timer." Judging from these numbers, he guessed Koross to have a Level 6 Prayer Skill. "To think the most devout Priest I'd ever seen around these parts would be an alcoholic."

His light joke wasn't far off the mark. While the dwarf may not have had a Side Job, being able to devote himself fully to his God had its own merits. Such as being able to focus on training the Skills that really mattered. Not to mention a particularly powerful Perk if he became a Level 25 Priest with no Side Jobs.

"Ain't nothing in the Scripture that says us Priests can't enjoy a good drink, lad."

Buddy smirked to himself. He wasn't a particularly religious guy, but he had to admit the Sun God Solus was probably his favorite one. His clergy were definitely more fun than any of the others he'd seen. Not to mention the priestesses who worshipped him always seemed to have amazing boobs.

With their preparations ready, the group of five headed off into the lush forest. They warily crossed between trees and bushes, keeping a close eye for anything that the Mimic could be disguised as. Even if it was a shapeshifter, a Mimic could not shrink or drastically alter its rectangular body. This was true for both the Lesser and Greater species of the monster. However, it could drastically change the way it looked on the surface. Along the way, they pierced and attacked several suspect rocks, two fallen trees and one stump. They followed the trail of gnawed trunks and curiously chopped off tree branches.

Buddy felt an odd sense of incongruity. He decided to give voice to his concerns. “I think our target is inviting us in. The trail’s way too obvious.”

“Aye. That bugger’s supposed to be smarter than this, right?”

“It’s still a Mimic though,” said Xera while climbing over a small ridge. “Even if it became ten times smarter than normal, it would still be as dumb as a rock.”

Harold decided to chime in. “She has a point, but I’m with Buddy. This is way too suspicious.”

The party moved onward carefully, watching their every step and minding their bearings. After about ten minutes of painfully slow progress, they arrived at a clearing. Rather than a natural meadow, something had cleared out all the trees in the vicinity and turned them into about twenty small, flimsy huts.

“Goblins,” muttered the Rogue under his breath. A goblin was a monster that vaguely looked like a ten or eleven year old child. It had green skin, a bony physique, and exceptionally long nose, chin and ears. Regular goblins hovered around Level 10 or 15, but that was just a formality. The weak body of a goblin meant that, despite its actual Level, its true strength was closer to a Level 8 or 9 monster. But goblins never fought one-on-one. They attacked in great numbers and often roamed in packs of dozens, maybe hundreds of them. They often made crude villages like this one where they could breed and multiply like the vermin they were.

But this village had already been exterminated.

“What the fuck?” Mark was so shocked he reflexively cursed. The scenery that unfurled before him was entirely too familiar. There was blood everywhere. It painted the walls of the flimsy hovels. Bits of goblin flesh were strewn about the place. Piles of grey ash littered the scenery. But one overwhelming theme was immediately apparent. There was not a single corpse left behind. It was almost exactly like what he had witnessed first-hand in that damned dungeon. Only it looked like the monster had tried its absolute darndest to outdo itself.

Since their ‘glorious leader’ was currently staring slack jawed at the scene, Buddy decided to take charge. “Think it’s hiding in here?” he whispered. “There’s a lot of crappy baskets and pots around the place.”

“Yeah,” nodded Koross. ”Them logs around the campfire are also pretty suspect. Could be in the huts, too.”

“I have an idea. I can try to smoke it out,” suggested Xera.

“Won’t you be wasting your MP? I thought those Ruin spells were quite costly.”

“They are, but I’ll be fine, Harold. I have over 1,000 MP, you know.”

The men shared several glances and nodded at Xera. They moved closer to the village as a group without dropping their guard, even for an instant. After walking closer to the edge of the village, Xera signaled everyone to stop. The Witch held her staff up towards the sky and closed her eyes. And then she started chanting her Spell.

“There is nowhere to hide! There’s nowhere to run! This village will burn like the heart of the Sun!”

She chanted it clearly and purposefully, her voice echoing unnaturally.

“With infinite glee, I call upon thee!”

A chill ran down the men’s spines. They had a very bad feeling about this.

“INFERNO!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. A massive hurricane of red-hot flames appeared out of nowhere and swept across the goblin village. It must have been at least ten meters in diameter and five meters tall. It only lasted several seconds, but that was enough to set the entire village ablaze.

A wide smile appeared on Xera’s face. It was so wide that it seemed like her jaw was about to fall off.

“Kuhihihihihi,” she giggled. “Huhuhuhuhuhuhu. HAHAHAHAHA! AAAH HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!!”

She spread her arms and let out a maniacal four-stage laugh. Her eyes gazed madly at the flames that ravaged the wooden huts and turned everything in front of her to ash.

The rest of the group merely went *Ahhh. There it is!* inside their heads. Nobody knew how or why, but it was a sort of unspoken rule that female Casters were all fucked in the head. This seemed especially true for offense-type Jobs like the Witch. In Xera’s case, it was obvious that she had a bit of a pyromaniac streak going on. The way she cackled like that made it clear she

had forgotten completely about her surroundings. This was a serious fault that could one day lead to her death.

“Get down!” screamed Buddy. Everyone besides the still laughing psycho hit the dirt. A streak of dark matter flew above them, precisely through the spot where the dwarven Priest’s head was half a second ago. It kept going for several more meters before fizzling out of existence.

“Aegis!” screamed Koross. A transparent bubble of golden light wrapped around the party. A second mass of darkness slammed into the hastily-constructed barrier. The Aegis Spell couldn’t take it and shattered, but proved enough to repel the attack.

Buddy recognized the Shadowbolt Spell. He leaped to his feet while shouting “It’s a Warlock!” to his comrades. In his right hand he held three throwing knives, poised between his fingers. He threw the trio of blades at a particular tree some twenty meters away. The Rogue was aiming at a rather dense pile of leaves, which he had confirmed was the origin of both Shadowbolts with his heightened senses.

In an instant, the leaves opened up to reveal an array of dagger like teeth and a thick, red tongue. The out-of-place maw swallowed up the three throwing knives like they were an afternoon snack.

“Kishaaaaaa!” screamed the Mimic. Since it was already discovered, its leaf camouflage was now useless. It leaped from the tree branch it was sitting on. By the time it hit the ground, it had already returned to its regular appearance - that of a wooden chest frame with six black spider-like feet and a trio of tongue-tentacles gripping a sword each.

Having confirmed their target, Mark grabbed hold of his flare launcher. He aimed it at the sky and pulled on the string. There was a bang and a flash as the bright-red flare shot off screaming into the blue sky. Having confirmed the signal was sent, he turned his attention towards the monster. In the next instant he felt something small and sharp fly past his face, leaving a scratch on his cheek.

[You have suffered a minor scratch. HP -2.]
[You have been poisoned. HP -20.]
[Your movements have been dulled by the poison.]

Buddy, who had already distanced himself from the two Warriors in the front, broke out into a cold sweat. He recognized the projectile that grazed Mark as his own poisoned throwing knife. One of the three he had thrown at the Mimic just moments ago, to be precise. The monster had somehow caught it inside its mouth and had thrown it back with speed rivaling his own. If its aim was better, Mark would have a metal handle sticking out of his eye socket right now.

Buddy wasn't a particularly religious guy, but he still found himself offering a silent prayer to whatever God was listening.

Please let our backup get here in time!

Part Five

Sergeant Hargan ran as fast as he could through the forest. Two of his men followed behind him - one was a Warrior like the Sergeant, the other was a Paladin. Up in front was the three-man adventurer team that was part of his group. A Ranger, a Berserker and a Cryomancer, all human women, though one would normally question if that extremely ripped and tall Berserker with the short hair was truly female. She was so masculine that it was impossible to tell whether those lumps on her chest were breasts or pecs.

At least the Ranger and Cryomancer were more pleasant to look at. If he were a more indecent man, Hargan would probably relish the view of their tight butts as they strained against the two's tight leather trousers. But he was not like that. He knew full well such thoughts had no place on the battlefield. Besides, his wife would probably murder him if she even suspected he was looking at young girls' behinds.

The six of them were rushing towards the flare signal sent up by another team. The Ranger at the very front deftly and precisely navigated through the forest, while the Berserker mowed down any trees and monsters in her way with her gigantic sword. That Job was vastly different from Warriors who focused on fighting through techniques like blocking, parrying and riposting.

A Berserker was a killing machine that ran on anger, blood and death. Once the red haze enveloped them, they became unstoppable fighting machines who made one question who was the real monster. Even if they thrived in combat, the side-effects of their reckless fighting style meant their bodies were often left in a dire state. Ending a long battle riddled with wounds, bleeding heavily and with several broken bones was pretty much the norm for them. It was not a Job for the weak-hearted.

The Cryomancer, on the other hand, valued precision. Her main method of attack was launching shards of conjured ice at her opponents. She could also fire an icy beam that froze everything it touched or summon a localized blizzard to blind and confuse her enemy. All of those Spells required a high degree of accuracy to demonstrate their full effect. After all, if a Cryomancer's enchanted ice pierced a flesh and blood body, it would almost always explode into shards. The unfortunate victim's insides would be shredded by that frozen shrapnel, causing massive damage. A truly gruesome

and ruthless method of attack and one Hargan hoped would be able to subdue this Sweeper.

A thought he would likely be able to confirm sooner rather than later.

Another team had sent a flare, signaling they had confirmed its location. That was fifteen minutes ago. Judging from how everyone was told to spread out, Hargan's team would be the closest one to the distress signal. Thankfully, there was a tall pillar of smoke that rose up from the same direction, so they could easily find their bearings. And half a minute later, they would be at the scene.

The six of them burst out of the treeline into an unnatural clearing. Nearby was a small village - probably goblin in nature - that was set ablaze. The scenery between Hargan and that rampaging fire bore the scars of a fierce battle that was already over.

He immediately recognized two of his guardsmen. Mark and Harold were both slain, covered head to toe in wounds and lying in a puddle of their combined blood. It looked like the finishing blows were a sword through the throat for Mark and a small knife in the eye for Harold. The sergeant cursed under his breath. He didn't give a rat's ass about those opportunistic adventurers, but losing his men was another story.

A few meters away from those two was the body of a dwarven priest, his white robes dyed a crimson red. The left part of his head had been blown clean off, most likely by magic. Much like how that elven survivor had described it, the Sweeper had probably taken out the healer first.

About a dozen meters further away lay the corpse of that Rogue from The Dark Hand guild. Most of his right arm and left leg were gone, probably bitten off in the struggle. He had a small knife sticking out from his left shoulder, identical to the one lodged in Harold's skull.

And sitting in front of the blazing inferno, hugging her knees and gently rocking herself back and forth, was the Witch, Xera. The sole survivor was making eerie sounds as she stared at the flames. It sounded like she couldn't decide if she wanted to giggle or weep. Hargan, as the leader of his squad, signaled the others to move forward. They walked carefully towards her, keeping an eye on their surroundings. There was quite a lot of debris strewn around the place, so there was no telling where the Sweeper might pop out from.

Xera froze and went quiet when she heard them approach from behind her. After a few seconds she looked over her shoulder at them. After confirming their presence she returned her gaze to the dancing flames. The Witch then held out her right arm and pointed to the side with a slender finger, right at the smoldering lump of something some fifteen meters away from her.

“It’s dead,” she muttered in a shaky voice. “It was heavily wounded after… killing the others. It tried to run, but I finished it off.” Having finished her bare-bones explanation, the poor woman withdrew her hand and resumed her earlier behavior.

The six who had just arrived at the grizzly scene shared a few difficult looks. They approached the supposed dead Sweeper. Once they got closer, they were able to confirm it. It was an organic chest with teeth. About two thirds of it was burned to a crisp, letting off a repugnant smell. There were three plain-looking and well-used swords on the ground around it. It sat there perfectly still, not showing a single sign of life.

Hargan stabbed it with his spear just in case. It penetrated deep into the corpse, causing a small trickle of yellow blood to leak out of the wound. Since he saw no notification that he had dealt a blow, it was certain the thing in front of him was actually dead.

“Stand down,” he ordered while relief washed over him. The thing that had murdered so many of his men was no more. He turned his attention back to the two dead soldiers. They volunteered for this, just like the others. Mark’s brother had been part of the patrol that disappeared in the cave, so to him this was more personal than to anyone else. Harold acted like he was only in it for the money, but the sergeant knew that man always stood by his friends. So even if these two had to pay with their lives, he hoped they at least passed on with the knowledge they helped bring that monster to justice.

About ten minutes later, the rest of the punitive force arrived on the scene. Hargan brought them up to speed and informed them of the Quest’s success and the terrible price it took on their side. He directed the rest of his men to throw together some stretchers so they could bring the bodies back to the city for burial. At least they had something to bury this time. The adventurers gave their condolences and lent a hand with the grim task.

Hargan walked up to Xera who was still on the ground, hugging her knees. The fire had long ago been put out by the Cryomancer to prevent it from

spreading to the rest of the forest, but the Witch still stared off into the distance beyond it.

“Are you alright?” he asked out of genuine concern.

“I’ll be fine,” came the immediate reply. “Please leave me here. I just… need to be alone right now.”

The sergeant sighed. Even if this adventurer was a high Level for this neck of the woods, it still didn’t feel right leaving a distraught girl alone in the forest like this. Still, with the Sweeper gone, he doubted anything in here could lay a hand on her. Her voice also seemed to have regained a bit of vigor, so he decided it wasn’t his place to interrupt her mourning.

“Understood. Please take care. Drop by the barracks later to receive your reward.”

The beauty looked up at him with a weak smile. She gave him a quiet “Thank you,” then turned her attention back to the frozen ashes in front of her. Hargan nodded and proceeded to lead the rest of the adventurers and guards back to civilization. They moved out while carrying the four mangled bodies on stretchers that were hoisted up on their shoulders. The whole thing could only be described as a funeral procession. Which was, more or less, the case.

Some half an hour later, the girl stood up. She walked over to a white rock poking out of the dirt and knelt before it.

The rock sprouted a yellow cat-like eye. The oddly rectangular stone wiggled itself free from the ground and stood up on six black spider-like legs. The coarse white surface melted into itself and transformed into a series of light oak planks bound by fake steel. The Mimic opened its mouth and a long, red tongue wrapped around Xera. Rather than fight or struggle, she just sort of let it happen.

It lifted her up, then slammed her head first into the ground. She let out a scream of pain while her face was dragged through the coarse dirt, disfiguring it horribly. This was her punishment for nearly messing things up. And, even though she wouldn’t admit it directly, deep down she really enjoyed the rough treatment.

In truth, Xera the Witch was not a real person. This being currently having her face dragged along the dirt was not even human. Her actual name was

Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila, a Cerulean Succubus who served as the Mimic's familiar.

When a Warlock or Witch performed Summon Familiar for the first time, they were given a choice. They had to pick which species of demon would best fit their needs. Four of their five options were the naturally large and tough fiends, the many-eyed floating heads called beholders, the vicious canine hunters known as hellhounds and the mana-devouring spider-like stalkers. The one this particular Warlock chose was the final one - the conniving and treacherous succubi.

Succubi were demons that could alter their appearance through the Shapeshift Skill. They were well suited to infiltration, deception and taking advantage of the desires of others. It was a type of demon that was very close in its hunting habits to mimics. One could say that the only real difference was the type of chest that was used as bait. In short, the succubus seemed like the perfect partner-in-crime to this enterprising spider-chest. And the one it was bonded to was Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila, or Xera for short. She was a Cerulean Succubus, which was a sub-species that relied on magic in combat and was capable of manipulating the minds of mortals by tampering with their dreams.

The bonding of a demon to a Warlock was, in essence, a magical contract with iron-clad fine print. The Warlock wanted to use the demon's power, and the demon wanted to play around in the physical realm. It was a compromise both sides would need to accept. Except that demons were by nature devious, prideful and greedy. They hoped to exploit the loophole whereby if their master or mistress had died while they were summoned, then they would be free to do as they pleased for as long as their physical bodies held out.

Objectively speaking though, the demons saw the whole bonding thing as little more than a way to stave off their boredom. Xera was no different, which was why she eagerly accepted the contract when the chance presented itself. She had dreams of killing off her master, who she imagined to be some snot nosed ugly virgin who didn't know any better, and setting herself free. Even if she was unable to attack her master directly, she could still seduce or entice him with her wiles. With his judgement clouded and his reason stripped, it would be a simple task to have him meet with an

‘accident.’ She had already done so several times in the past, so she was confident it would work this time as well.

However, such thoughts came to a grinding halt when she was materialized in a forest next to a couple of dead bodies. She stared blankly at the being that had summoned her, silently cursing her rotten luck. Her master was a Mimic, a barely sentient box that had absolutely no sex drive or reproductive organs to speak of. How the hell was she supposed to seduce something like that? How did this thing even manage to summon her in the first place? And while she was quietly lamenting the bad situation she had gotten herself into, it abruptly got worse.

The Mimic bit off both her legs, crippling her before she could even speak to her new master. This attack came without warning and for a completely idiotic reason. Her master was simply curious if demons were tasty. And, much to Xera’s horror, it found her legs to be to its liking. It gobbled up the rest of her in three big bites.

When a demon’s physical body was destroyed, its spirit would be sent to the Beyond - a realm of thoughts and dreams that was halfway between real and imaginary. Demons were immortal beings to begin with, so defeating them in the real world simply sent them back home. One had to try really, really hard to permanently destroy a demon, so what had just happened to Xera was not actually as fatal as it may appear.

If she had a jaw in this realm, it would undoubtedly be hanging open. She simply could not believe what had just happened. She was dragged into a completely different reality just so she could be pointlessly devoured. Was her new master really that big of a moron? Or was it simply that cruel?

Unfortunately for her, the answers to those questions were ‘yes,’ and ‘yes.’

Once the Mimic’s MP had recovered, it summoned her again, only to instantly eat her up. This happened over and over. No matter how much she protested or struggled, she was powerless to stop it. The creature simply wanted to enjoy the taste of her conjured body, as it was incredibly sweet and pleasingly chewy. It had a lot of fun while eating her, but it was still flesh born of mana. No matter how many times it ate her, Xera’s body parts would dissolve into nothing within a minute. It couldn’t sate its hunger or even use Cadaver Absorption under these circumstances. It was something the Mimic realized by the third time it summoned her. Still, it didn’t see that

as a reason to stop. If anything, it seemed like a reason to take things slower and savor the taste more.

The proud demoness was reduced to little more than a monster's plaything. Here she was, an immortal demon capable of reaping the souls of mortal men, and what was she being used for? Junk food. Her uncaring master gave no fucks about her suffering and tortured her for its own pleasure.

Xera was mortified at this realization. Her pride and willpower helped her withstand the humiliation and abuse, but that was only at first. Even if the body was fake, the sensations she felt were very much real. The pain of having her flesh stripped away and the agony of her bones shattering time and time again chipped away at her psyche. The overwhelming horror of being eaten alive every time she 'woke up' etched itself into her very soul.

Under such extreme treatment, she began to change. The fifth time she was summoned, she completely gave up on turning the tables on that heartless monster of a master. Her pride and willpower were long gone before the painful summonings even reached two digits. About the thirteenth time she was being devoured, she felt herself getting aroused. On the sixteenth devouring, her lower lips were absolutely drenched from start to finish. And then, on her twenty-third time being summoned, she actually had an orgasm while the Mimic was ripping off her breasts. From that point on she came at least once every time the Mimic sank its teeth into her soft flesh and ripped apart her sensitive skin.

The boundary between extreme pain and extreme pleasure was paper thin, and Xera could no longer tell the difference between the two. The systemic abuse had already broken her, perhaps forever. Rather than suffer through the pain, her tortured mind embraced the pleasure with open arms. Under the Mimic's unceasing assaults, she transformed into a hardcore masochist who longed to be hurt and abused by others. Truly befitting of a demon that fed off men's perversions.

And so, on the thirty-fifth summon, it finally stopped eating her. But the damage was done. The haughty demoness that looked down on others was nowhere to be found. Instead what stood in her place was a panting pervert with a glazed look. And the reason the Mimic finally stopped munching on its new, favorite snack was because it actually had a use for her now.

The monster didn't just sit idle while it was waiting for its MP to recover. It had followed after that elf who escaped its murderous rampage from earlier. It couldn't quite track him, but it could still walk in the same general direction. Eventually, it found the nearby city of Monotal. However, it dared not go near it. After all, those armed guards at the gates looked exactly like the five men it killed on its way out of the dungeon. It wanted information, but was too conspicuous to pass through that checkpoint. It didn't have to though - that sort of thing was why it bonded with a familiar in the first place. A succubus was pretty much perfect for this sort of infiltration. And so, it summoned Xera and used the telepathic link between them to give her its orders. She was to disguise herself as a human, enter the city and feed it information.

The succubus, despite her newfound eccentricities, was still very good at doing her job. She assumed the guise of a wandering adventurer and entered the city without much incident. The Sweeper subjugation Quest was big news, so she found out about it immediately. This information was relayed to her master through their mind-link. The Mimic then quickly realized it was in deep trouble. It was sure those people would not rest until they hunted it down, and judging from Xera's reports there were going to be a lot of very dangerous people coming after it.

In truth, it had overestimated their conviction. If it had just escaped far away, then there was no way they would have been able to track it down. It had convinced itself a confrontation was inevitable, so it started preparing. The Mimic ordered its familiar to keep gathering information while it hunted in the forest to raise its Levels and Skills.

The Mimic may have been a natural genius when it came to ambushes and exploiting weakness in combat, but succubi were just as devious when it came to deception and conspiracies. The succubus inadvertently gave her master a suggestion. She would infiltrate the punitive force in order to help the Mimic fake its death. If things went well, she might even bring it some powerful adventurers on a silver platter. That way it could get more powerful, lose the heat and get paid all in one go. It questioned the importance of money at first, but that quickly changed once Xera explained money could be exchanged for delicious things.

And so, with her master's approval, the succubus got busy. The first obstacle was the mandatory Appraisal check. Adventurers had to go through it to

prove they met the Level 20 minimum requirements of the Sweeper subjugation Quest, but doing so was bound to reveal Xera's true nature to these mortals. However, Cerulean Succubi were very good at controlling the hearts of men. The middle-aged official who was doing the examination was no match for the demoness, who made lewd promises in exchange for forging her paperwork. The pent up government worker had taken those sweet words hook, line and sinker.

After getting what she wanted, Xera put him to sleep with magic and activated her Dreamweaver Skill. She then wiped the memory of their encounter from his feeble mind before walking out of his office as if nothing had happened. It was her way of erasing the witness without leaving behind a dead body. It was a good thing the one doing the test was a weakling with pitiful or non-existent Mental Fortitude and Wisdom, otherwise the succubus would not be able to manipulate him as easily as she did.

From then on it was a simple matter of blending in with one of the parties and feeding her master information about it through the mind-link. When the time came, the Mimic invited them to a suitable kill zone. Xera then made a distraction with the Inferno Spell, allowing her master a free shot at the party's healer. That's when that troublesome Rogue interfered and ruined the ambush by saving the troublesome Priest's life.

It didn't matter though. Since all the humans were focused on the Mimic, Xera was able to hit Koross with a point blank Fireball to the head. The Spell exploded, enveloping the dwarf's head in flames and ruining his focus. He didn't die on the first hit, but then came a second and a third before his head finally burst open. Much like the scene with the janther, the front line noticed too late that their healer had died. Betrayed, demoralized and without magical support, the other three had no chance of victory.

It took less than a minute to wipe out the whole group, after which it was time to set the scene.

While Xera was doing her job in the city, the Mimic had gone back into the dungeon. The news of a Sweeper running loose meant the place was practically deserted, allowing it to come and go unhindered. The reason it went there was because it needed a scapegoat, something to take its place. The corpses of monsters that died in the dungeon would be recycled and disappear, but such things didn't happen once their connection to the

dungeon was severed. So the Mimic went in, found one of its kind, wrapped its tongue tentacles around it and dragged it outside by force. The lower-Leveled monster struggled, but was unable to resist its much stronger, more powerful kin. Once it was forced outside the dungeon, it was murdered by a single use of the Ebonfire Spell. The weaker mimic's corpse was then put into its killer's Storage.

And now that the time was right, it was taken back out. Xera and her master then 'decorated' the corpse by burning it and stabbing it in several places and throwing some weapons around it to make it look like it had dropped them. All that was left was to wait for everyone to gather and feed them the story. And they bought it. They were even going to pay Xera for basically betraying and murdering her teammates. All things considered this plot of hers was a resounding success.

So then, why was the Mimic pissed off at its familiar to the point where it found it necessary to shred her face on the coarse ground? Because the Inferno Spell that Xera used as a 'distraction' very nearly set fire to the tree it was hiding in. That pyromaniac side of hers wasn't part of her act, that was just how she always was. The succubus, it would seem, was one of those people who just wanted to watch the world burn.

As for the Mimic, it was left feeling a little hungry after that exercise and had to give up on all those tasty corpses. Since its tongue was already wrapped around something delectable, it absentmindedly ate its familiar for the thirty-fifth time. It chewed on her slowly, ignoring her moans and wails. At some point, the delectable succubus flesh suddenly vanished from its tongue.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

It then immediately remembered that doing that would not actually sate its hunger. Oh well. It shrugged its non-existent shoulders and took out a dead deer from its Storage to snack on.

[General Information]
Mimic (Lesser) (+), Genderless, 3 months old
Level 25.00 Mimic
Level 13.14 Warlock

598/598 HP (+1.4/sec)
465/500 MP (+0.7/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 78, DEX 79, AGI 70, END 104, INT 100, WIS 64, LCK 30, MNT 55

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 5.23
Storage - Lvl 4.05
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 4.15
Biomass - Lvl 2.31
[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar - Lvl 2.98
Power Overwhelming - Lvl 1.00
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 5.78
Stealth - Lvl 4.61
Sword Mastery - Lvl 5.85
Projectile Mastery - Lvl 2.44
Ruin Mastery - Lvl 4.60
Domination Mastery - Lvl 3.37

[Spell List]
Ruin - Shadowbolt, Ebonfire, Frostbite, Dark Explosion
Domination - Mass Panic, Delirium

Part Six

Having eaten its fill with animal carcasses from its Storage, the Mimic once again called forth its familiar. It let out a gurgle of “Suhnon Fanilier.”

Several rings made out of purple light sprang forth from the chest. Upon closer inspection, the rings weren’t solid, but actually made out of countless tiny runic symbols. The un-letters kept shifting, changing and orbiting around the Mimic. The circles slowly shrank, converging on a single point just half a meter in front of the Mimic. Over the ten second duration of the Skill they tightened up into a small ball of light. And on the ten second mark, it exploded into light with a soft pang.

[Proficiency level increased. Summon Familiar is now Level 3. INT +2. WIS +1. MNT +1.]

In its place was Xera in her true form. Her shape was predominantly humanoid and about one hundred and seventy centimeters tall. However, nobody would ever mistake her for a human. Her smooth skin was a light blue color while her waist-long, straight hair was a deep blue like a piece of the night sky. Her eyes glowed with a bright red light that gave off the feeling she was staring into one’s very soul. She had a fittingly gorgeous face with azure lips so soft and plump that it felt like a crime not to taste them.

The outfit she was wearing, if you can even call it that, was made out of blood-red leather. Her long legs were covered in high-heeled boots that went up to her smooth thighs. A triangular bikini-like garment hid her sensitive bits. Her arms had long detached sleeves that ran from her bicep all the way down to her wrist. Each one was attached to a silver ring on the succubus’s middle finger, covering the backside of her hands and leaving her palms and fingers uncovered. A choker encrusted with a single, sparkling gem was fitted around her neck. Her formidable breasts, each almost the size of her head, were held up by a risque, corset-like chest piece. It ran around her back and covered the front and underside of each boob with a triangular strip of leather. It wasn’t even properly connected at the front, leaving the valley of her cleavage completely exposed. The half-corset was clearly designed to push up and accentuate her already impressive cup size rather than serve any practical purpose.

Altogether, her wide hips, dangerously narrow waist and eye-catching mammaries gave her an undeniable hourglass-like figure. The gap between her thighs was wide enough to make her walk a natural hip-swaying gait that caused her plump rump and marshmallow-like boob-flesh to jiggle enticingly with every step. It was a body that truly had only one purpose - to enflame the lusts of men. Even her demonic features looked beautiful and alluring next to the spectacle that was her slutty body.

The two curved, golden, ram-like horns that jutted out from the sides of her head clearly declared her identity as a demon. Then there was the long, black, spade-tipped tail that grew out of her lower spine. Most impressive of all were the two bat-like wings attached to her upper back. They were a mix of deep red limbs and sky-blue membranes. They gave her a wingspan of over two meters which was more than enough to allow her to fly.

Floating unnaturally next to the demonic seductress was her staff - a long wooden shaft tipped with a half-circle staff head reminiscent of a hook. A purple crystal ball floated inside it, as if attached by invisible strings. Both this staff and the outfit she was wearing were essentially an extension of her spirit. It wouldn't be entirely wrong to call them a part of her conjured body, though they served no purpose beyond decoration. The staff in particular was so frail that even a toddler would be able to snap it in half.

Having been materialized in the waking world for the umpteenth time, Xera immediately crossed her arms and pouted at her summoner.

"Jeez, Master! You know you didn't have to actually go that far!"

The demoness protested to being devoured alive. It was a fact that, regardless of its methods or intentions, this chest had opened up a whole new world of pleasure for her. But she still refused to openly admit that she actually longed to be abused and hurt. The shattered remnants of her pride would not allow her to concede so easily. She would be a failure of a demon if some mortal had managed to dominate both her body and soul to such an extent.

"I know I messed up, but surely that, hnnnn, punishment was a bit much!"

She let out an unintentional moan when she recalled what had happened minutes ago. No matter how much her fractured pride tried to deny it, deep down she wanted more. Her master was currently ignoring her with a cold attitude that seemed to somehow egg her on. Again, this wasn't on purpose,

the Mimic was simply busy. It was reviewing the Status Screen of its bonded familiar.

[General Information]
Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila
Succubus (Cerulean), Female, 748 years old
Level 11.14 Succubus
Level 7.88 Pyromancer
243/243 HP (+0.4/sec)
255/395 MP (+0.3/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 13, DEX 13, AGI 13, END 46, INT 79, WIS 39, MNT 55, CHR 59

[Succubus Skills]
Energy Drain - Lvl 4.37
Demonic Seduction - Lvl 3.33
[Pyromancer Skills]
Devouring Flame - Lvl 3.33
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 2.86
Dreamweaver - Lvl 2.86
Domination Mastery - Lvl 3.69
Pyroclasm Mastery - Lvl 3.69

Raising the Level of Summon Familiar from 2 to 3 did indeed increase her abilities across the board. Unlike beings born in the physical world, a demon's strength relied entirely on how much MP was spent to summon it to this realm. For example, no matter how many times she killed things with Pyroclasm Spells, the related Mastery Skill would never raise. Likewise, her Job Levels would never progress on their own.

A familiar's body was, essentially, the manifestation of the Warlock's Summon Familiar Skill. Demons didn't actually have bodies in the Beyond, they were simply lent one by their summoner. So ultimately, their actions in this world helped raise their master's Warlock Job and Summon Familiar Skill. As the master's Skill and MP went up, so would the strength of the familiar.

Frankly speaking, a situation where a Level 13 Warlock summoned a Level 18 familiar was unthinkable - they just wouldn't be able to have that much

MP. However, considering her master had a total Level of 38, her being 20 Levels below was pitiful. Still, it was enough to take down that dwarven Priest in less than a few seconds, despite the Level gap.

“Hey! Are you even listening to me?”

“Kleh?” grunted the Mimic. It wasn’t actually listening, no. It wondered what the hell this infernal woman wanted now.

“I still need to go get the gold, right?”

“Ack!”

It suddenly remembered she still had to collect her reward for ‘a job well done.’ It quickly gave her permission to do that through the thought-link. Xera sighed and began morphing her appearance. Much like her master, she could not assume a form that was hugely different from her own. But she could still adjust things like her proportions or the colors of her skin, eyes and hair. Even her fetishistic leather outfit started expanding and wiggling across her body as it took on the appearance of a blue robe. About three minutes later, ‘Xera the Succubus’ was replaced by ‘Xera the Witch.’

“I shall be off, Master. And please do not eat any more trees. We’re supposed to be lying low and I’d hate to see you discovered.”

The succubus realized exactly what she had said and frantically tried to correct herself. “D-don’t misunderstand! It’s not like I care whether you kick the bucket or not, okay? I just don’t want to see a successful conspiracy turn to nothing because of your careless actions!”

The Mimic questioned her about what buckets had to do with anything.

“Well it’s- Haah. Nevermind.” Xera dejectedly dropped her shoulders. She knew better than to try to explain things to that monster. Just making it properly grasp the whole plan took almost an entire day.

Really, she thought, *how come I had to be saddled with an incompetent master like that? Well, at least he lets me run around and do as I please while I’m in town, so I can’t complain too much.*

Having cheered herself up a bit, Xera once again said goodbye to her master and went off in the direction of the city. Left to its own devices, the Mimic mulled over what it should do next. It had gained two whole Warlock Levels when Xera killed that Priest and about one and a half Mimic Levels from

murdering the other three. It was a huge gain considering how little time the actual fighting took. The only other time it noticed a significant bump in its Job Levels was when it ended up intruding on another janther's territory. This one was a bit weaker, so it was able to kill it with repeated applications of Mass Panic to disrupt its attacks. The beast seemed to build up some resistance to the magically-induced fear, but by that point it was already bleeding heavily.

And of course, Cadaver Absorption failed to gain anything useful. The Mimic was realizing exactly how lucky it had gotten with the Warlock Job. It must have consumed over fifty corpses so far, but it only got three minor successes for a total of 6 STR. Well, it did also get a 'moderate success' out of a goblin and absorbed a bit of Sword Mastery Proficiency, but the actual gain turned out to be only 3%. It seemed that Skills were really hard to raise beyond Level 5.

Still, it had a lot to look forward to in that regard. Its busy days in the forest had allowed it to unlock two new Restricted Skills.

[Biomass]
The shapeshifter's intimate knowledge of its own body has allowed it to stockpile additional mass without affecting its mobility or appearance while improving its own regeneration.
Requirements: Level 20 Monster Job, Level 3 Shapeshift, STR 50, END 50
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases body mass by 20% per Level of this Skill.
Increases automatic HP recovery by 10% per Level of this Skill.

This one was particularly useful. The additional mass was necessary raw material when performing large scale shapeshifting. For example, it could now manifest eight spider legs instead of six, allowing a greater degree of control over its movements and a noticeable increase in speed.

Its tongues could also stretch out farther and strike with a bit of extra force.

The downside was that lugging that extra mass around consumed more energy and made the Mimic hungrier as a whole. That wasn't a problem

though, this forest was basically an all-you-can-eat buffet for this particular chest. Not to mention that eating a whole lot at once was the main way of raising this Skill's Levels.

Next was the Warlock Skill the Mimic had unlocked earlier today.

[Power Overwhelming]
The Warlock becomes a bastion of arcane might.
Requirements: Level 10 Warlock, Ruin Mastery, INT 60
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 20 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Ruin Spells will cost 400% more MP.
Ruin Spells will be 200% more effective.
The Ruin Spell effectiveness multiplier will increase by an additional 20% per Level of this Skill.
The effects of this Skill will last 20 seconds.

Most Caster Jobs treated MP as a valuable resource that had to be used sparingly. Their magic was not unlike a candle that burned slowly and steadily. But Warlocks were different. Their magic was like a rocket - brief, but blindingly brilliant. It was well suited to the Mimic's ambush-focused hunting patterns. Being able to settle fights in the first hit was the essence of Assassination.

However, there was a problem. The Skill was literally 'blindingly brilliant.' Activating it surrounded the Mimic with an aura of arcane energies that crackled around it like lightning. It was so flashy and noisy that it easily overwhelmed the effects of Stealth. There was no way it could successfully trigger Assassination under such conditions. Ultimately it was a Skill meant for finishing a fight rather than starting it, but the Mimic failed to realize that when it picked it.

Still, what was done was done. Besides, it looked like it would be good to use this in situations where its ambush failed and it had to fight back. It could burn through its mana in one or two Spells and get a head start on its opponent before moving in to finish it off with melee attacks. It would certainly be more useful than Projectile Mastery.

[Projectile Mastery]
A measure of your ability to handle hand-thrown weapons.
Requirements: None
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases damage dealt with hand-thrown weapons by 10% per Level of this Skill.

This was pretty much identical to other Mastery Skills. It would seem that, in addition to the straight up power boost, these Mastery Skills also raised the Mimic's understanding of a specific weapon or school of magic. How to grip them, how to slash with them or, in the case of magic, how to properly chant and focus when casting Spells. It would be more accurate to say that this imparted knowledge was the true reason behind the increase in offensive power.

As for this particular Skill, the Mimic had gotten it after playing around with the spears it had looted off those guards back in the cave. It was convinced they could be a powerful ranged attack, so it ended up practicing with them. It even managed to improve its dreadful aim every time the Mastery Skill went up in Level.

Then it realized that it could just use magic if it wanted to attack at range and completely abandoned the endeavor. Even if it could gain some Attributes from it, it would much rather focus on its Mimicry and Warlock-ery. Using throwing weapons and chanting magic at the same time was also quite impossible. Trying to do so would result in the Mimic biting its own tentacles off by accident, not to mention it lacked the concentration to properly aim both of them at the same time. So it gave up on Projectile Mastery. What would be the point in training up a Skill that had little to no practical use?

This monster had stumbled onto the simple truth that, as tasty as Attribute gains were, attaining a few high Level Skills and Jobs was ultimately better than having a lot of low-leveled ones. Even if an adventurer had multiple combat-related Jobs like, for example, a Ranger, a Rogue, a Warrior and a Priest at the same time, they could never actually use those all at once. How

could one simultaneously block with a shield and shoot a bow? Or sneak around and ambush things while they were busy chanting healing Spells? It was simply impossible, like trying to turn one's head left and right simultaneously.

Not to mention that the Attributes were mostly exclusive. A Warrior's Attribute gains that focused on STR and END would be pretty useless for a Ranger which needed AGI, PER and DEX. And while both of those had some overlap with the Rogue Job, that was an occupation that relied on completely different Skills. Oh sure, ultimately it was possible to master all those Jobs at once, but people did not have that sort of lifespan available. In a world where quality was significantly more important than quantity, it was vital to focus one's training and become a specialist. Jack-of-all adventurers were, quite simply put, useless past Level 50. A deep pond was many times more dangerous than a knee-deep ocean, after all.

Even the Mimic was vaguely aware of that fact. Although its familiar was created with a Level that was below 20, her magic already seemed close in potency to that of the Mimic with a Level of 38. The only reason it was able to bring out this much power in the first place was because its Main Job and two of its Skills - Cadaver Absorption and Biomass - provided a boost to all Attributes, which included INT. Much like how STR would improve all melee attacks, INT would improve the effectiveness of all Spells. Right now, the Mimic had INT that was more or less standard for a Level 20-ish Warlock with proper magic-related Skills.

It would continue to use Cadaver Absorption as much as possible, though. Doing that could still give the Mimic free Attributes, Skills and Job Levels without having to spend time on actually training them. And so, after considering what it would do in the future, it decided to focus on improving its current Jobs and Skills rather than seek out new ones.

Speaking of which, it had reached Level 25 in its Mimic Job during that last fight. It opened its Status Screen and was greeted with two unknowns. One was the MAX next to the Mimic Job. The other was the (+) sign next to its Species of Mimic (Lesser). And the (+) next to its Job was not there. Did the Status Screen not show up properly and misplaced the ever-important (+)? The Mimic opened and closed its Status several times, but it always came up the same. It was again stumped. Trying to Inspect the (+) sign did nothing,

and inspecting its Species opened up a screen that was equally useless since it contained trivia the monster already knew.

[Mimic (Species)]

A low-class shape-shifting monster that exists only in dungeons. Mimics hunt by ambushing careless adventurers. They can be born in the form of treasure chests, walls, floors, doors or furniture. Even though they can change their appearance at will, they cannot change the shape they were born with.

The species is divided into two variants - Lesser and Greater. The main difference between them is that Greater Mimics are far more cunning and resilient than their Lesser kin.

So, desperately running out of options, it decided to ask for help. At least now, it had someone it could actually ask for help.

Xera was making her way through the forest when she felt a slight tugging sensation on the back of her head. It meant that her summoner wished to communicate with her.

“What is it, Master?” she inquired through the thought-link.

The chest wanted to know what the thingie on the other thing was for. Also, how come the thingie was on that thingie instead of the other thingie? And, perchance, was that thingie delicious?

The succubus let out a sigh. ‘Conversations’ with that moron always ended up being more or less like that.

“Master, I have no idea what you’re trying to say.”

There was a short pause. Then her master’s Status splashed into her consciousness like a boulder into a puddle. She let out a reflexive “What the fuck?!” at the sudden influx of information. It caught her completely off guard, causing her to blank out for a few seconds. She then tripped on an exposed root and fell flat on her face, smashing her forehead against a rock in the process.

Even at a distance, that monster still managed to make her suffer. She wondered if her master was perhaps one of those idiot savants, only instead of maths or painting, it was unnaturally proficient in the art of tormenting others.

That same master impatiently asked her again about the ‘thingie.’ She got up and rubbed her forehead, wiping a trickle of blood away in the process. After turning her attention to the Mimic’s Status, she immediately realized what it was trying to say.

“Master, try chanting Rank Up,” she sent back.

“Rank. Tasty?” came the fragmented reply.

“Just do it!”

“Orders. Me. Snack. You.”

The Mimic kindly reminded the uppity familiar of her position.

“Haah,” sighed Xera. She had briefly forgotten two important things in the heat of the moment. The first thing was that her master regarded everything good or beneficial as ‘tasty.’ And the second was that, when presented with a stupid question, she had to give an equally stupid answer.

“Sorry, Master. Yes, rank is tasty.”

Overjoyed at this revelation, the Mimic immediately chanted “Rank Ukh!”

[Rank Up - Mimic (Lesser)]
Requirements: Level 25 Mimic Job, Level 5 Shapeshift, END 75
[Effects]
Species will become Mimic (Greater).
Level Cap on Mimic Job will be increased to 50.
Shapeshift Skill Proficiency will increase.

The Requirements have been met. Do you wish to Rank Up?
[Yes]
[No]

The master agreed with its familiar. This did in fact look delicious. And so, it eagerly chose ‘Yes,’ then blacked out.

Part Seven

[Rank up complete.]
[Congratulations! Your species has become Mimic (Greater).]
[The maximum Level of your Mimic Job has been increased to 50.]
[Proficiency level increased. Shapeshift is now Level 6. AGI +1. DEX +1. END +2.]

The Mimic's consciousness woke up to a brand new window waiting for it. The evolution from a Lesser to a Greater Mimic was over with. It didn't feel any different though.

[You are ravenous. Automatic HP and MP recovery are now disabled.]
[You are starving. You will lose 2% of your maximum HP every 60 minutes.]

Well, apart from the hunger. It was suddenly overcome by an overwhelming desire to eat and consume in order to survive. An overpowering need to fill its belly if it wanted to live. There was a void inside it - a vacuum so strong that it threatened to make it implode on itself. Something screamed at it to abandon all pretense and stuff its belly. However, it would not succumb to its base instincts so easily. Not anymore.

And then it reactivated its short-range magical perception.

The first thing it 'saw' was itself. The monster had reverted back to its dormant state - the spider legs, tongue and eyes had all retreated back inside its body, leaving it in its default chest-like appearance. It looked exactly the same as it did before. This was probably some defensive mechanism its body enacted on its own.

Having confirmed its body seemed to be intact, it turned its attention to its surroundings. It was no longer in a forest, but in some new place it didn't realize. It was sitting on a floor made out of wood - actual wooden boards, unlike the fake ones it used for its disguise. All around it were scattered wooden crates and boxes of variable size and make. Some looked newer while others were practically rotting.

The walls of this place were weird, especially the ones on its left and right. They were slanted at about 45 degrees and leaning against each other. Did the wooden surfaces want to be a ceiling? At least the ones directly behind

and further in front of it were normal looking, but their neighbors had forced them into a triangular shape. It was obvious which pair of walls were boss in this room.

And yes, this was indeed a room. Although the Mimic didn't know it, the tight space was actually an attic. It was only about three meters at its tallest point, six meters left-to-right and about ten meters front-to-back. The awkward placement of the slanted roof meant that, realistically speaking, you'd have to crawl if you wanted to reach into the sides. Cobwebs and dust covered the place and the Mimic itself, suggesting it had been there a while.

But how did it get here? And where, exactly, was here? Those were both good questions. If only it had someone it could ask.

Oh wait, it did. It felt the link between itself and its familiar was still active, meaning the succubus would probably know what was going on. It sent a telepathic message to get her attention.

"Snack!"

Names? Were those tasty? It didn't know, but snacks were tasty. Therefore, the familiar's name would now be Snack.

"Who the hell is Snack?!" came the irritated response. "Ack! Master, you're awake!"

"No. Hungry. Bring food."

"Understood, Master. I will be there in fifteen minutes!"

It seems this familiar had an idea of what was going on. It was time to ask it for the details.

"Where? How? Why?" it inquired.

Xera then began explaining her side of the story. She had gone into the city and collected 650 GP for her 'contributions' to the Sweeper subjugation Quest. Since her master had been unconscious, she was left without orders. That situation was something she fully expected to happen, which was why she wanted her master to Rank Up and allow her to play around for a while. It's not something she had experienced personally, but learned about it from one of her previous masters.

But before she could start playing around, she realized she had left her master unconscious at the site of its supposed death. If someone were to

discover it, then her cover would be blown and it was questionable whether she would be able to run away in time. So naturally she went back to that place and, under the cover of night, dragged it over to one of the nearby farms. She used her natural charms to convince the elderly couple who ran the place to let her stay for a while and store her ‘luggage’ in their attic.

The Mimic found that last bit to be particularly interesting.

“Farmers? You mean humans?”

“Yes, two of them. Oh, you should probably avoid killing them since-”

“Too late.”

In the middle of Xera’s explanation an old, balding farmer went into the attic to fetch something. He walked in through the trap door in the floor and was summarily eaten. His wife, having heard the horrible gnashing and thrashing that came from upstairs, went to investigate. The last thing she saw was her husband’s blood splattered all over the place before her head was chopped off from behind. Needless to say, she was also eaten.

[Your hunger has been sated. Automatic HP and MP recovery will return to normal.]

[You are no longer starving. Your HP will no longer deteriorate.]

“Was tasty. Chewy, but oddly satisfying.”

Even if they were old and barely had any meat on them, their intestines, livers and hearts proved to be as filling as expected.

The succubus sighed to herself. Again, she forgot exactly who she was dealing with. Now they would have to burn down the farm to cover their tracks and run away before anyone came asking too many questions.

“How long was I out?” came the next question.

“Three days, Master… Huh? Master? Are you okay?”

“Yes?”

Maybe just my imagination, she thought.

“If only three days,” continued the Mimic, “then how come so much hunger?”

“That… part of the Rank Up process, I guess?” she offered. “But! More importantly than that! Master, you can form proper thoughts now!”

It wasn’t her imagination, but reality. What she received through the link weren’t some fragmented words, but properly constructed sentences that had actual will and direction behind them. Also, it didn’t once say ‘thingie’ and mentioned tasty things only three times in that conversation!

“I can have thoughts?”

“Yeah! Like just now!”

It seemed that Rank Up fundamentally upgraded the Mimic’s sad excuse for a mind. It was now capable of holding a conversation without being constantly distracted. There was even a chance of it making informed opinions based on more than its immediate desires.

“Are thoughts tasty?”

“... Yes, Master, thoughts are tasty.”

She gave up. For the briefest moment she had the vague hope her Master would stop being such a colossal moron. In the end, even if its mental abilities were expanded, it was still a three month old monster that was barely even sentient. It didn’t really have any desires beyond the instinctive need to eat and grow, so Xera had only herself to blame for pointlessly getting her hopes up.

“I beg of you,” she added, “please stay still and don’t move!”

The Mimic had no reason to refuse. If ‘staying still without moving’ was an Olympic sport, it would have a serious shot at the gold medal. So it returned to its spot in the attic and sat down. It still had unfinished business with its Status.

“Rank Ukh!” it chanted and a familiar looking-window appeared.

[Rank Up - Mimic (Greater)]

Requirements: Level 50 Mimic Job, Level 10 Shapeshift, END 200

Possible evolutions and their effects will be revealed once the minimum requirements are met.

Meeting certain conditions will unlock additional options.

The Mimic's curiosity skyrocketed. Rather than become a higher variant of the same species, it seemed like it could evolve into something completely different. And it appeared as if what it did during its journey to that point would somehow increase its options. However, it could not simply learn these unlock conditions from its Status. While these menus and screens were useful, ultimately they did not contain much information beyond what the monster already knew.

Well, no point worrying about things it had no control over. Achieving the bare minimum requirements would be pretty straightforward and it seemed like it would get them eventually. Truthfully, it was looking forward to the Level 10 Shapeshift more than anything else.

[Shapeshift]
A measure of your ability to mould and sculpt your own flesh.
Requirements: Born as a shapeshifting Species
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Affords the ability to alter physical appearance at will.
The extent of transformation is limited based on species.
Increases shapeshifting speed and precision by 10% per Level of this Skill.
Increases how much of the body can be shapeshifted with each Level of this Skill.

Similar to Mastery Skills, this one had the hidden effect of increasing the Mimic's general anatomical knowledge. Things like how to construct stronger muscles and tougher hides. When eating something, it could gain deeper insights into how it was put together. Doing so also meant it could mimic those body parts more effectively and even pick out weak points such as tendons, hearts, eyes and throats with its swordplay. At this point it could probably take apart and then put together a human with its eyes closed. Not that it had eyes in the first place, though.

"Master!" shouted Xera. She had just poked her disguised head into the attic. Then she recoiled when she saw the state of the place. "Eck! What in the hell?! Why is there blood everywhere?!"

This was the first time she had actually seen the aftermath of the Mimic's feeding frenzy. The walls, the floor, the ceiling and pretty much all the crates and boxes were stained with fresh, crimson blood.

"Forget that," said the Mimic through the thought-link, "where is food?"

"Ah, right. Here you go, Master."

She raised her hand. It was holding a string, and tied around the string by their feet were five whole chickens with freshly broken necks. Well, it wasn't like the farmers would need them anymore. Xera set them down on the floor in front of her master. The animate chest opened its mouth and greedily scooped up the still warm bodies with its flexible tongues and devoured them in a flash. It chewed on them for a few seconds before swallowing.

"Not bad. Tastes like people."

Xera just barely managed to stop herself from retorting with 'Isn't that backwards?'

"Snack! The thingie that can be traded for tasty things! Show me!"

The succubus rolled her eyes. They were back at 'thingie' again. Still, at least it was pretty clear what it meant this time. She unhooked a small leather satchel from her waist and emptied its contents on a dry spot of the floor. A number of glistening gold coins clanked onto the wooden planks. Each coin was a little under five centimeters in diameter and about three millimeters thick. One side had a shield-shaped crest decorated with flowers. The other bore the image of a bearded human with a fancy hat. These gold pieces were the first ones it had ever seen.

"Here they are, Master. Thirteen King pieces worth 50 GP each, for a total 650 GP."

But her words did not reach the Mimic. Its entire attention had been captured by those coins. The only light source in this dark attic was what was pouring through the trapdoor Xera was still in. Yet they seemed to shine and glisten with a beauty like it had never seen before. This was a fascination well beyond liking shiny things. It was as if the gold itself was speaking to the Mimic.

‘Hold me’ it whispered. ‘Protect me’ it said. ‘Never let me go’ it demanded. And the simple monster would comply. How could it ever resist such sweet temptation?

The faux-chest’s imitation lid opened itself wide. And amidst the rows of pointy, jagged teeth appeared something new. Something different. Rather than a red tongue covered in clear drool, what appeared was the upper body of a woman. She had waist-long, straight hair that was the color of brilliant snow. Her skin was so pale that anyone who saw it would doubt if it was ever touched by the sun. The eyes were a deep crimson that seemed to stare into one’s very soul. Her breasts, almost as big as her head, jiggled pleasantly with every slight movement. A proud, pink nipple stood on each one. Combined with the unnaturally thin waist and flared hips that gave way to the rest of the Mimic, it gave her an astonishing hourglass figure.

The girl-in-the-box wasted no time and stretched out both her arms. They extended unnaturally, like rubber, covering the meter-and-a-half distance between the monster and the coins in an instant. Her tender fingers then slowly, almost reverently, scooped up the gold pieces and brought them back to the main body carefully.

The human-looking part of the monster then leaned back against its upper jaw which instinctively retracted its teeth. It assumed a pose that looked like someone relaxing in a lounge chair. It then placed the gold coins in the valley of its cleavage. Its hands and arms wrapped around those formidable breasts, pushing them together and creating a sort of fleshy cradle for the Mimic’s new prize. A dumb smile drifted naturally onto those full, pink lips and the monster stood perfectly still, reveling in the sensation against its marshmallow-like breasts. The cold, heavy, shiny metal felt incredibly pleasant, after all.

“M-M-M-Master?” called out Xera, but that master was currently preoccupied.

This is it, thought the Mimic. *This is right.*

A treasure chest that finally had actual treasure. Those completely normal and entirely un-magical coins fulfilled a craving the monster never knew it had. Right now, at this moment, it was satisfied. It felt content for what was probably the first time in its short life. People were tasty. Levels, Skills and

Attributes were also tasty. But gold was different. It had no actual flavor, yet the Mimic thought that it was absolutely delicious!

“Master!” yelled Xera. This time she seemed to get the Mimic’s attention. The hazy stare and dumb smile on that beautiful face disappeared. It stared at the demoness with a disgusted expression like she had just taken a massive dump in its porridge.

“What is it, Snack?” it sent through the thought-link, “I’m busy!”

“Why am I sticking out of Master’s jaws?!”

That was the reason Xera was staring. The human body currently poking out of the fleshy insides of that chest looked almost identical to her. The colors were wrong, it had no wings or horns, but everything else was exactly in the shape and proportions of the succubus’s true form. She also had the disturbing thought that, if the woman-shaped part of the Mimic had gone on just a few centimeters lower, it would certainly also mirror her lower lips.

“Snack is tasty. I needed tasty parts to enjoy delicious gold,” it replied simply.

The merciless Mimic had eaten Xera so many times that it had absolute knowledge of her body. It was, simply put, the body it knew best. Humans all had small differences between them. The proportions, skin, hair, teeth, jaw, face - every individual was unique in various ways. So having tasted the exact same succubus-shaped fruit over thirty times made it so it naturally became the form it was most familiar with. It didn’t particularly care about pigmentation, horns or wings, which was why it came out looking like an albino half-succubus. The important thing was it could properly enjoy the weight and feel of the gold coins by borrowing Xera’s sensitive boobs.

In truth, this new development had very little to do with its evolution into a Greater Mimic. The monster was perfectly capable of achieving this shape when it raised Shapeshift to Level 5. After all, even if it couldn’t abandon its outward chest-like appearance, the insides were a completely different story. It simply had no urge to do something like this until now. This form was ill-suited to combat and the higher center of gravity meant it would have trouble balancing on top of its favorite spider legs. The sole purpose to the pseudo-Xera was, quite simply, to have fun with it.

Xera was dumbstruck yet again. As a shapeshifter herself, she more or less understood all of that. However, the realization that the Mimic had created a cheap copy of her just to enjoy itself made her feel oddly violated. It was almost worse than being eaten alive.

Almost, but not quite.

After about three and a half hours of the Mimic playing with Xera's hard-earned money on top of Xera's borrowed breasts, it finally seemed to have enough. It stowed the gold inside its Storage and called out to the succubus who was sulking in the corner.

"We go now."

The demoness turned her head around. She was sitting while hugging her knees and facing away from her master. She had been trying really, really hard not to mind the situation behind her. It almost worked, too. Until that creature started letting out cooing noises using her own voice. So she minded it immensely. At least it was back to how it was before - a simple chest with eight black imitation spider legs jutting out from under it. It was much easier to look at than that twisted imitation of her own true self.

"Understood, Master," she replied while standing up. "Where to?"

"Back to dungeon. Something I have to do."

Interlude

A Cheap Drink

Lylandros never wanted much out of life. Just to become really famous and get all the ladies. A simple, straightforward dream. But that was then, and this was now. Thoughts of fame and fortune were so far removed from his consciousness that he questioned if he really had them in the first place.

Right now, the only thing on his mind was whether he would be able to afford to pay his bar tab. That was all he wanted to think about. That and the thing right in front of him - a glass of Rotgut. This vile, brown, murky concoction was an alcoholic drink so strong it could knock out even a dwarf in about four shots. It was also incredibly cheap, which was convenient for the poverty-riddled elf. The downside was that it tasted horrible. That much was to be expected considering it used goblin ears as an ingredient. The flavor was so bad that no sane person would try it more than once. Just the rank smell was more than enough to discourage a lot of people.

However, Lylandros knew the flavor of Raela's brain matter. In the past, he had jokingly said he'd love to have a taste of that buxom elven Druid, but he didn't mean it literally. Compared to that, this mixture was as delicious as honeyed mead. He mentally cursed himself for remembering that taste, and plunged deeper into depression and revulsion. If only there was something around to help him forget.

Oh wait, there was.

He screwed up his courage and determination, then downed his drink in one go. The pungent taste and high alcoholic content hit him almost immediately. It felt like a horse had kicked the side of his head.

[You are intoxicated. The effects of the AGI, DEX and WIS Attributes have been reduced by 50%.]

He slammed the glass back on the counter with enough force to crack a less sturdy receptacle, and panted heavily, but one drink wasn't enough. The unwanted thoughts were still in his head.

In his mind, he knew he made the right call. His common sense told him he had no chance against that monster. It had magic powerful enough to kill a

person in one hit. There was no way he could have matched up to such a creature. He felt that even if the four of them were completely rested and fully prepared, they could never have hoped to take it down. And having heard how the subjugation Quest he set in motion concluded, he was definitely right.

His mind knew that, but his heart refused to accept it. Dark thoughts welled up from within every time he had a moment to himself. Which, incidentally, was pretty much all the time.

I abandoned them.

Why was I the only one spared?

I should have died with them.

"Ah, crap," he mumbled. His mind had drifted off in that particular direction again.

The elf seriously doubted he would be able to sleep at night if he wasn't blackout drunk. Even if he managed to calm himself enough to doze off, he would always be beset by nightmares and wake up a few hours later in a cold sweat. And so, even if it tasted like ass, even if it was slowly poisoning him, even if it made his breath horrible enough to peel paint off the walls - he would still drink his 'medicine.'

But first, he had to get a refill. He lazily raised his arm towards the barkeep. The rough-looking gentleman with the bald head and black goatee went over to his customer.

"Let me guess," said the barkeep, "another shot of Rotgut?"

Lylandros simply nodded in return with a "Yesh." He was the spitting image of a habitual alcoholic who had given up on life. The barkeep didn't judge or belittle the elf for that, though - he knew better. These people would latch onto him the instant he treated them as anything other than a source of revenue. They'd one-sidedly pour out their sob stories and either take up his valuable time, or get rowdy when he tried to ignore them. The best solution to those awkward situations was to avoid creating them entirely. The man had long ago run out of fucks to give, so he kept relations between himself and his customers strictly professional.

“Sorry, twiggy,” he said, “but that lady over there bought the last bottle.” He pointed to the woman sitting in the corner. She was wearing a blue robe and had long, straight blonde hair tumbling down her back. Her sizable breasts were visible from behind, poking out slightly from either side of her narrow back.

“If you want some more, you’re gonna have to take it up with her.”

“No more… more battles? Bottles?” asked Lylandros. He was already struggling to form sentences after just one shot.

“Nope. That was the last of it.”

Although Rotgut was technically a drink, it was only ever ordered either as a prank, as a form of punishment or, in some cases, out of morbid curiosity. But even then it was only ordered once - people who actually ordered a second or third shot were extremely rare. With so little demand, the barkeep only kept one or two bottles in stock at any given time. So given the choice between a pretty lady who paid upfront and a filthy twig with a tab, it was obvious which one was the more valued customer.

“FFFFffffuck,” let out Lylandros.

He got up from his stool and ambled in her general direction. The elf had one goal in coming to this establishment - to black out for the night. Even if she didn’t want to share the drink, he’d still find a way to accomplish his mission. There were more ways than one to lose consciousness, after all.

“Hey now,” the barkeep called out to him. “Don’t get violent with her, alright? I’ll have you thrown out of here with both legs broken if you try something funny!”

Lylandros turned around unsteadily and mockingly saluted him. “Aye aye, cap’n!”

The barkeep just sighed to himself with a mumble of ‘bloody twigs’ before signaling the security he’d hired to keep an eye on the elf. The over-two-meter tall goon leaning against one of the walls nodded in response that he understood his job was to keep the elf from causing any damage to the owner’s establishment.

“S’cuse meh,” said the suspect in question to the woman in blue. “Could I bother you fro- for a drink of that?”

The black-haired beauty turned her head. Her blue eyes locked with his hazel-colored ones. They then followed his outstretched arm that was pointing at the drink on her table.

“Haaah. Why not?” she said with a sigh. “Have a seat, stranger.”

“Ohhh! Thanks kindly, ma’am!”

“Don’t mention it,” she said with a bit of a bitter smile. It was the sort of face that clearly said she had far bigger problems to worry about than some random elf crashing her one-woman drinking spree. She poured some of the Rotgut into the glass in front of her and passed it to Lylandros.

“Here you go.”

“Thanks,” he replied while staring intently at the drink.

Downing this thing was no easy task. He had to swallow it fast so his tongue and nose would not have a chance to react. Such a feat took a certain amount of mental fortitude and bravery. So when the elf lifted his gaze and saw the girl chugging directly from the bottle in big gulps, his body reacted before his drink-addled mind could. And he threw up on the floor.

The goon saw that and, after silently confirming with the bartender, went to work. Less than a minute later, Lylandros was thrown out into a dusty alley through a side entrance. He fell on the ground hard, like a sack of day-old laundry. The bouncer yelled something about a ‘final warning’ at the poor sod before walking back inside the bar.

Lylandros just chuckled to himself. Tonight was a failure, it seemed. This was the only place he knew of that both served Rotgut and would allow him to keep a tab. He really had nowhere to go, so he just lay there on the cobblestone alleyway. He decided he might as well try to sleep right here. It was already way past sunset, so there was nobody around to disturb him anyway.

Or so he thought. Less than a minute later he heard footsteps and felt someone looming over him.

“Where do you live?” asked the gentle female voice. His eyes fluttered open and barely made out her face in the darkness. It was that pretty girl who so kindly offered him some of her drink. She bent down and extended an arm towards him, which caused her breasts to sway in a pendulum-like motion.

“Come on,” she beckoned as he tore his eyes away from her hypnotic cleavage. “I’ll get you home.”

“Th-thank you,” he said, weakly. He really did not expect her to actually care, but he wasn’t stupid enough to turn down help when it was offered. In reality, this was the first time since that day someone had ever treated him as anything other than a burden. He gripped her tender hand with no hesitation. After helping the poor man to his feet, she lent him her shoulder. The two of them then trotted off into the night.

Whether it was the drink, the oddly romantic moonlit atmosphere or, most probably, the soft breasts pressing against his side, Lylandros felt he rather fancied this girl. He made a small pass at her, commenting on how beautiful she was. The girl simply smiled demurely and blushed slightly, saying he was rather handsome himself. One thing led to another and by the time they reached Lylandros’s hovel, they were already passionately kissing. They barely made it past the front door before their clothes started slipping off their bodies almost by themselves. Not even their undergarments remained by the time they made it to the bed.

The elf was pushed down on the bed by the woman whose name he didn’t even know. She slowly climbed over him, letting her bare nipples drag along his skin. Intoxicated by the erotic situation, the poor virgin could do little else but hope he wouldn’t bust a nut immediately. It was a very real concern as the nude body before him felt like it existed for the sole purpose of rousing men’s lust. Not that he was complaining.

She straddled his waist and ground her moist lower lips along his already stiff member. She let out a few moans that were positively dripping with passion. After making sure both of them were as aroused as possible, she reached down and grabbed it. The elf watched in awe as she raised her hips and guided his manhood towards her special place. She bit her lip and slammed her hips downwards, taking the entire length inside her all at once, popping the proverbial cherry of the young elf.

But, alas, the young man could not resist the onslaught of pleasure and came immediately. He grabbed her flared thighs and thrust his hips upwards without thinking. He committed spurt after spurt of semen to her innermost depths while his partner simply hummed delightedly.

About fifteen minutes later his orgasm finally ended. The woman let out a small, satisfied sigh. It was her first real ‘meal’ since she was contracted to that moronic box. She dismounted her partner and got off the bed. Despite accepting copious amounts of bodily fluids, not a single drop ran down her thigh.

Xera snapped her fingers. The discarded blue robes on the ground leaped up in the air and flew at her as if being pulled in by an invisible wire. They splashed against her naked body like goop and began shifting and transforming into their previous appearance. Having completely ‘clothed’ herself in seconds, the succubus retrieved the bottle of Rotgut she brought with her and poured the last of its contents down her gullet.

“Aw man, they really dilute this stuff nowadays,” she complained to nobody in particular after finishing it off. “This swill isn’t enough to even give me a buzz! Sometimes I really hate this body’s constitution!”

Since her flesh was a magical construct, it did not need food or water. Even her ‘feeding’ just now was nothing more than scratching an itch. Technically, it had the effect of restoring HP and MP, but since she was already full on both accounts the whole affair amounted to little more than a midnight snack.

It wasn’t quite as satisfying as she’d hoped, though. She preferred the taste of big burly men rather than these scrawny virgins, but beggars couldn’t be choosers. Right now, her master was sleeping due to its Rank Up, but she had no idea how long her short vacation would actually last. Under these circumstances, was it really any wonder she eagerly gobbled up the first suitable victim she found? That elven lad had no resistance to her Demonic Seduction whatsoever and nobody of note would really give a shit if he died. He was not ideal, but good enough.

“Damn. I really need something stronger. I wonder if I can find some Firebrand Whiskey around this place?”

She tossed the now-empty bottle of Rotgut away and made her way out of the filthy hovel to seek her next victim.

As for Lylandros, all that was left of him was an emaciated corpse. A body that was little more than skin and bones with a wide, creepy smile on its hollowed out face.

Chapter Four
Urges

Part One

The Red Zone of the Litigar Dungeon Complex was undoubtedly the most inhospitable place around the city of Monotal, as expected of the most dangerous part of the only dungeon in the area. Still, not many adventurers past their first two or three months on the job would find this place particularly dangerous. It was certainly not that bad when compared to the majority of other dungeons strewn throughout the world.

Unlike the cave-like systems of the Green and Yellow Zones, the Red part looked more like a crypt or mausoleum. Stone brick floors, walls and a dark ceiling that seemed to go upward forever. Stone gargoyles could be seen lined up at random along the walls and creepy carvings could appear and disappear from the floor and walls seemingly at random. Pale blue torches bathed the corridors in an eerie light, just enough to keep one's eyes from adapting to otherwise profound darkness. The air was heavy with the stench of death and carried a faint strawberry-like flavor. The latter would be a side effect of the slightly thicker concentration of mana. The former was caused by the denizens of this place.

Hovering around Level 15, they were all undead beings that made this place particularly troublesome. To begin with, most undead would not get tired and did not feel pain. Those they encountered would be met with relentless pursuit and an unyielding hatred. The simplest enemy to fight in these halls were skeletons. Just a glance would reveal what variety of skeleton it was. Would it be the Skeleton Soldiers carrying rusted weapons and armor? Or perhaps Skeleton Archers that never seemed to run out of arrows for their short bows? And most troublesome of all were the Skeleton Mages that bombarded their targets with Spells that were attuned to the Ice and Dark elements.

They often moved and attacked in small groups of four or five. Much like adventurer parties, they usually had a good balance and worked with a sort of teamwork to maximize each individual's Skills. The sight almost seemed like a promise to those who invaded this place. 'Die in here and this will be your fate' was the message it sent across to the living. This was, of course, pure superstition. Those Skeletons were simply monsters spawned out of the mana-enriched miasma that lingered in this place. But the threat they bore

was still very real. Encountering one such patrol was said to be one of the most dangerous things that could happen in this place.

And yet they were still the simplest to fight. They came at you from the front and didn't get back up on their feet once you smashed them to bits. Ghouls, on the other hand, were different. These half-rotten carcasses skulked the halls absentmindedly until they caught the stench of the living. They would charge forward running on all fours like some wild animal, screaming their heads off at their target. Once close enough, they'd leap at them in a frenzy of filthy claws and jagged teeth. A single scratch often meant being afflicted by a combination of poisons and diseases that would slowly drain HP while also numbing one's movements.

And they were relentless. Even if they lost a limb or half their torso, they would not stop attacking. Chopping off both their legs didn't seem to deter them one bit, either. Slicing off their head simply meant their headless torso would keep coming at you. They were monsters with no vital points that could be exploited to rapidly drain their rather significant HP. One had to thoroughly destroy and dismantle them in order to put them down the old fashioned way. A very troublesome opponent to fight.

The last species of monster in this place was also the most annoying one - specters. These incorporeal beings appeared as a transparent green mist that vaguely resembled people. They would phase through the walls and floor while showering their victims with debilitating Domination magic. Paralysis, Sleep and Panic were the more common magically-induced afflictions that plagued any adventurers who came here. To make matters worse, their transparent gas-like bodies could only be harmed by magic. Spells and enchanted weapons would be necessary to defeat these, so any adventuring group who came here unprepared would surely fall apart the first time these specters appeared.

Still, what made this place truly inhospitable was that combat would often attract more undead from nearby. A train of more than twenty enemies was almost common in these parts. Much like goblins, this part of the dungeon aimed to overwhelm invaders with sheer numbers rather than individually strong monsters. The worst case scenario for the living was when the stream of enemies contained all three types of monster. Dealing with the murderous skeletons, rogue ghouls and unpredictable specters at the same time made for

an incredibly grueling fight. Even if the adventurers won, they would likely need to deal with the troublesome side-effects from fighting with the undead.

In the end, very few adventurers dared to step foot in here and instead went to hunt and train in the nearby forest. It would be significantly slower, but also much safer.

Still, a place like this attracted four specific Jobs that were well suited to dealing with the undead. Priests and Paladins were an obvious choice. Their Spells and Blessings served as both offense and defense. Bathing an undead creature with holy magic would purify it rather than heal it and all the negative effects on their Status could be neutralized with repeated application of the Cleanse Spell.

The third Job that was really good at dealing with the undead was the Necromancer. Fighting hordes of undead with more hordes of undead proved to be extremely effective. While the minions fought at the front, their master was able to rain magical support from the rear. Even if some of the walking corpses under their control were destroyed, replacing them was a simple matter. The remains of naturally appearing undead could be used to bolster the Necromancer's forces. But that wasn't all - these self-proclaimed rulers of death could turn enemy undead into their own minions and force them to obey their commands. All it took was the right combination of Skills.

Truly, it was like fighting fire with fire. Except that fighting undead with undead was extremely messy and chaotic, which perpetuated a Necromancer's habit of not having any living friends. However, fighting undead with actual fire proved to be one of the best solutions.

"Inferno!" shouted Xera.

The small tornado of flames swept up the pack of ghouls, skeletons and specters in front of her. The Spell only lasted a few seconds, but it was wide enough to cover the entire hallway and engulf every last one of them. Although direct contact with the Inferno was not as particularly damaging as one might expect, it was brilliantly bolstered by her Devouring Flame Skill.

[Devouring Flame]
A Pyromancer's overwhelming fire leaves behind naught but ash and cinders in its wake.
Requirements: Level 5 Pyromancer, INT 40
Type: Toggled (ON)

Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: 100 meters
[Effects]
Increases the cost of Pyroclasm Spells by 20%.
Pyroclasm Spells will apply Devouring Flame to your target for 5 seconds.
Devouring Flame inflicts damage equal to 10% of the initial hit each second.
Increases the damage of Devouring Flame by 20% per Level of this Skill.

This Skill symbolized the strength of the Pyromancer and Cryomancer Jobs. Their Spells did not deal as much damage up-front as something like a Wizard or Warlock, but the potent secondary effects of their Skills more than made up for that. This situation was a perfect example of that. Most of the undead did not succumb to the initial damage of the Inferno, but were set ablaze and swiftly turned to ash. Only the tougher ghouls seemed to linger, but Xera would just finish those off with an extra Fireball or two. All while laughing maniacally, of course. How could she not? The undead were particularly flammable, after all. To her, this place was little more than a playground and she acted like it.

That attitude earned her a hit to the back of the head with a thrown rock.

[You have suffered moderate blunt trauma. HP -44.]

“What are you doing?!” shouted her master directly into her mind. “I said leave the Ghoul corpses whole!”

CLINK

The succubus, who was currently masquerading as an adventurer, rubbed the back of her head, feeling the sticky sensation of blood seeping into her hair. Her immediate reaction was the desire to yell something along the lines of ‘Do it yourself then, you lazy bum!’ What actually came out of her mouth was- “Understood, Master.”

She hated to admit it, but it had a point. This wasn’t the first time it had to yell at her after she got carried away with setting things on fire. Ghouls were the only suitable targets for its Cadaver Absorption, after all. As for Xera, she was actually trying to distract herself from what was going on behind her.

CLINK

That master of hers had copied her form yet again just to play with its gold coins. She was forced to walk ahead of it and do all the work while it enjoyed itself. Worst of all, it used a mockery of her true form to do so. A demon's body was something incredibly personal. It was essentially their true self given form in the material realm. Having someone pervert it for their petty amusement like that was pretty much the ultimate insult to a demon.

CLINK

And it made the broken succubus undeniably aroused. The physical torture may have lessened, but the psychological abuse seemed to be getting worse. Or better, depending on the point of view. Still, the proud demoness would not admit any of that so readily. Yet she was still powerless to go against the wishes of her master. The most she could do in this situation was try her absolute best to ignore that blasted monster.

CLINK

But alas, that was proving difficult. Since the Mimic was currently cradling the gold coins in Xera's mirrored breasts, every step it took made them jingle a tiny bit. Just enough to stimulate the tortured succubus's imagination.

CLINK

As for the Mimic in question, it was using the large number of undead to get stronger faster. These opponents proved to be too weak to give any significant increase to its close combat Skills or the Mimic Job. Feeding them to its Warlock Job would prove to be more beneficial in the short term, but all of its Spells had poor affinity against the undead.

CLINK

Domination was outright useless, and all of its Ruin Spells were either of the Darkness or Cold elements, to which undead were pretty much immune. Technically, the Ebonfire Spell dealt Fire damage, but since it did that by igniting the target's soul, it had no chance to shine against these lesser varieties of undead. They were vessels of grudges and hatred. Something like an ego or soul did not dwell in the bones and flesh around here.

CLINK

But its bonded familiar used Pyroclasm Spells, which were predominantly Fire-attuned. And anything she killed would contribute XP to the Mimic's Summon Familiar Skill and Warlock Job, though it seemed it was going slower than expected. Perhaps receiving the XP second-hand meant it didn't get the full amount? Or was it because killing monsters provided significantly less XP than murdering adventurers? A combination of the two, perhaps? Still, it was better to get a few early Levels of those two things while it could. If the familiar was too weak to properly support its master later on, then what would be the point of her existence.

CLINK

The demoness proved to be surprisingly effective, too. Technically she was only a Level 8 Pyromancer, so how come she did so much damage? Was it because she had the Attributes of a Level 19 Caster? Did that matter in some way? It double-checked something in its Status Screen.

[Intelligence (INT)]
Improves your memory and capacity for knowledge.
Improves the effectiveness of your Spells.
Every 1 point of INT increases maximum MP by 5.

Now that would explain it. That second line wasn't there the last time it checked this Attribute. Then again, that was before it actually had the Warlock Job or any of the offensive Spells that came with it. There appeared to be no other changes when it checked through the rest of its Attributes. Well, at least now it knew to give those another look the next time it unlocked a Job. It kept thinking such things while idly rolling one of the King pieces up and down Xera's xeroxed knuckles.

"Master, adventurers ahead," came the silent report from its familiar.

The Mimic quickly put the coins back in Storage and assumed a less conspicuous shape. That is, as inconspicuous a living chest with eight spider legs and a cat-like eye could be. Still, it was its preferred shape for combat. These were the first people they had run into since they entered this place and it was itching to sink its teeth into actual flesh and blood.

This dungeon was pretty much 'tamed.' Signposts and markings left behind by others clearly showed the path to the Red Zone. Of course, the Mimic couldn't read any of them, but that was why Xera was there. Following those directions let the two of them reach the deepest part of the dungeon in about

ten or fifteen minutes. They'd been wandering around the labyrinthine corridors ever since. That meant they skipped straight to the most unpopular part of this place. It was also the dead of night outside, so them running into adventurers under these circumstances was extremely lucky.

Or unlucky, depending on the point of view.

It peered around the corner and saw four people, all human males. They seemed to be sitting around a campfire, talking about something. Sneaking up on them might prove to be difficult since they were all alert and keeping an eye on their surroundings. Then it realized that sneaking around was completely unnecessary. If they were in here they were unlikely to be higher than Level 15. As a Level 39 magic-wielding monster, it would have no trouble wiping them out in a frontal assault.

"Wait, Master!" pleaded Xera with a telepathic shout. "Can you let me handle those four?"

The Mimic that was just about to charge at them stopped dead in its tracks. "Why?" it asked.

"Information. Those people look like they might know something about this place. I wish to go over there and find out if they can somehow lead us to our objective. And the sooner we find it, the sooner we can be done here."

Xera really didn't want to spend too much time navigating this damnable dungeon. Incinerating masses of undead was fun, but that was merely the highlight. The majority of the last three hours were spent walking with nothing but that infuriating chest for company. She was looking forward to getting out of here and alleviating her stress and boredom. If those people had maps or a guide, then it would speed up their progress quite a bit.

"Okay. Go learn what you can."

The Mimic readily agreed to the proposal. It also wanted to be done with this place and find tastier prey. Not like it would actually eat any of those corpses. They tasted terrible and, much like Xera, wouldn't fill its stomach. Cadaver Absorption could be used on ghouls if the Mimic acted quickly. Its purpose was to train its Skills, so it didn't particularly care if it only had repeated failures. Even if the Skill succeeded there would probably be very little benefit since the undead could barely even be considered corpses.

“Ah, can you patrol the area make sure no monsters interrupt our little… talk? It might take about half an hour. Probably more.”

It had no complaints about fulfilling that request. Between the two of them, Xera was still the leading expert in dealing with humans so it had no choice but to rely on her judgement in these situations.

“Okay. I go hunt.”

Without wasting any time it went into full on storm-of-steel-and-teeth mode and skittered off somewhere while waving its swords around for no good reason. Xera let out a sigh of relief as it disappeared around a corner.

“Now then,” she said to herself, “how should I cook those four?”

Part Two

Xera thought about her approach. It had to be plausible and fit the circumstances. Male adventurers all had a soft spot for damsels in distress, a weakness that could be exploited. Correction, a weakness that would readily be taken advantage of at every opportunity. The succubus made up her mind - she was going to play the part of a lost adventurer who had gotten separated from the rest of her party and happened upon these kind men.

The straight black hair on her head rapidly turned blonde and extremely disheveled. Her eyes became wider and the crimson irises gave way to a sky blue. Her face morphed into a younger, more innocent one. The imitation robe she was wearing suddenly ripped open all on its own in several strategically chosen places. Scratches and bruises appeared on her exposed skin. The staff she was carrying was left behind on the ground - it wouldn't do to gain their trust if she was 'armed.'

With her preparations finished, all that was left was for her to approach the targets. What happened then would be one of three things.

Number one was she would be found out and killed. This outcome was pretty unlikely though. Even if it did happen all that it would mean was the Mimic would come back and kill them off, then resummon her and probably abuse her a bit for her failure. Not a big deal, all things considered.

The second and most likely thing to happen would be they would fall for it and try to protect her, possibly escort her. She could then wring any potentially useful information out of them using her demonic wiles and have her master come in and kill them afterwards. Actually, she might be able to do that last part herself, but that meant burning them to a crisp. Doing that would surely earn her yet more beatings.

She wasn't actually looking forward to those, okay?

Xera appeared before the men while panting heavily, clutching her side and wearing robes torn so thoroughly that they left little to the imagination. The men stared at her with surprise and wariness as she called out to them for help. Just as planned, they let down their guard upon hearing her fake sob story. But their gazes and expressions turned lecherous once they realized this beauty was alone, scared and vulnerable. Indeed, out of the possible

reactions they could make, they chose the outcome Xera was hoping for the most. The third one.

A group of rather unsavory-looking men find a cute-faced, scantily-clad and outrageously proportioned girl in a secluded place that was well removed from prying eyes. The succubus barely even needed to use her Demonic Seduction to entice them into assaulting her. They ripped off what clothes she had and put a knife to her throat. They fed Xera some bullshit lines like ‘don’t struggle, this is payment for our protection’ while holding her at knifepoint. She almost laughed at their idiocy, but managed to keep that from slipping out. The men broke out into a squabble over who got to go first, though from the sound of things it didn’t seem like this was the first time they’d done something similar.

I knew it, thought the succubus. She had guessed the true nature of these four brutes correctly. Not just their looks, but their body language, speech and facial expressions all gave off the feeling of ‘dishonest opportunistic bastards.’ She had a good eye for people and would often be able to pick out scumbags like these four. These stereotypical goons who were easily swayed by their desires made for easy prey. They even seemed to emit a certain presence that would easily make one think of them as bandits rather than adventurers.

Objectively speaking though, the difference between those two professions was paper thin. They all attacked their victims for personal gain and sometimes broke into their homes with the aim of robbing them blind. Pretty much the only thing that set them apart was that one group attacked monsters while the other chose people as their targets. One might argue adventurers served and protected the general public, but if they truly wished to do that they would have signed on as guards, soldiers or knights.

In short, saying banditry and adventuring were two sides of the same coin would not be too far removed from the truth. The two walks of life seemed to blur together on more than one occasion. It wasn’t unheard of to see actual bandits who were trying to escape their criminal past by starting anew as adventurers. Of course, the guilds would do background checks to weed them out, but it was inevitable some of them would slip through the cracks. Others would start as adventurers and end up as bandits simply because the power they gained went to their heads. There were even so-called ‘dark guilds’ that were essentially organized crime syndicates.

The four bandit-like adventurers had finally finished their discussion. Their leader would be the first to taste their new prize and Grabby would assist. The other two would have to patiently wait their turn while keeping watch. They then began to roughly violate the ‘unwilling’ girl in front of them. One pulled her down onto him while the other took her from behind.

Xera continued acting her part flawlessly as she screamed and struggled weakly while sandwiched between her two assailants. She made sure to wiggle her upper body as much as possible so that her breasts could sway back and forth in a wild manner. The arousing display combined with the demonically-enhanced stench of sex that permeated the men’s makeshift campsite created an atmosphere of utter debauchery.

Under such circumstances, it didn’t take long to goad the other two into joining the party. Even if they were supposed to be on watch, they were too weak willed to resist a succubus’s seductive presence. Xera used her lower body, mouth, hands and breasts to pleasure all four of them at once. She steadily robbed them of their reason, reducing them to nothing more than puppets who had no choice but to dance to her lewd tune.

Once the succubus was certain she had them completely under her control, she decided to stop wasting time and finish things off. She didn’t particularly care for the act itself. Succubi like herself craved semen and nothing more, seeing sex merely as a means to an end. While it was possible for them to feel pleasures of the flesh, such things paled in comparison to the sheer satisfaction and joy they felt when sucking the life out of their victims.

After making her mind up, Xera suddenly raised the intensity of her actions all at once, coaxing all four of her victims to simultaneous climax. Four streams of semen loaded with life force poured into her as if on cue. Two in her lower entrances and two more down her throat. The succubus merely hummed pleasantly around the man meat lodged in her mouth as she slowly sucked the very life out of her ‘assailants.’

The four of them were gradually turned to lifeless mummies over the next fifteen minutes. She then got up and prepared to dress herself, but was rudely interrupted.

“What are you doing, Snack?”

“Ack!?”

The succubus let out a stupid voice when she heard her master's voice. She slowly turned around when she realized the Mimic was standing right next to her. It clearly saw her standing naked over the corpses of the four men she was supposed to interrogate.

"Uhm, I was," she stammered," that is…"

"No information?" it asked, almost accusingly.

"No, Master. They attacked me and I had to-"

SMACK

The Mimic hit her on the side of her head with one of the adventurers' discarded weapons - a small one-handed mace. The force of the blow caused Xera to stagger and fall to the ground like a sack of potatoes. The damage inflicted was enough to instantly rob her of a third of her HP.

"Stupid!" it yelled at her. "Don't lie!"

Of course it would realize it had been deceived. Not even it was that big of a moron. It had actually come back to check on her a few minutes ago and saw the bizarre scene of the men turning to skin and bones with her in the middle of them. It didn't quite comprehend what was going on at first and wondered if it should interfere. But since Xera did not call for help it assumed there was no trouble.

Then the humans fell to the ground like a bundle of sticks while she was smiling widely to herself. At that point it was pretty clear she had killed these people completely on purpose. And now that it had a closer look, it could confidently say 'devoured' was more accurate.

"Did Snack just want to eat them?!" it pressed. The familiar seemed to hesitate as to what to say. So it forced her with an order. "Answer without lies!"

The contract meant orders had to be fulfilled to the best of her ability. While broad or unspecific orders could be taken advantage of, direct and simple ones like that were impossible to worm herself out of.

"Yes, Master," she replied. "I just wanted to eat them."

That was the truth of the matter. She wanted to devour these men for the simple purpose of having a bit of fun. The bit about squeezing information out of them was a plausible excuse, but nothing more.

“So my Snack lied to me?”

The succubus braced herself for the next hit.

“Yes, Master.”

However, the beating did not continue. She dumbly stared at the Mimic while it stood there idly with a bloodied mace in its tongue.

“Don’t lie to me again,” it continued. “Lying to me is bad. Very not tasty. So don’t!”

Xera dropped her shoulders and averted her gaze. Succubi lie and cheat all the time, it was within her nature. Deceiving people, especially her previous masters, was something Xera had done hundreds, possibly thousands of times with a confident smile on her face. Yet hearing it put in such a puerile and nonsensical way as ‘very not tasty’ somehow made her feel ashamed.

“Stupid!” it repeated. The succubus had to admit, being called that by this retarded chest was not exactly a good feeling.

“If you wanted to eat, you should have said so!”

Xera’s eyes widened. She turned to face her master with a shocked expression.

“Then… Master isn’t angry because I killed these men?”

“No. Snack wanted to eat, so Snack ate. That instinct is very tasty. Would have done the same.”

This was… praise? The tortured familiar could scarcely believe it, but this seemed to be the case.

Now that she thought about it, why did she even try to deceive it in the first place? Her current master was not a man, but a monster. Eating and murdering people was something it did on an almost daily basis, and with great gusto. Of course it would have no issue if its subordinate did the same. Therefore, she had absolutely no reason to hide her intentions from it in the first place.

“But lies were not tasty at all! So no more lies!” it demanded in a childish tantrum.

A faint smile drifted onto her bloodied face. Lies were not tasty. In other words, Xera would likely be allowed to do as she pleased as long as she

properly stated her intentions. Being soulbound to a monstrous box was shaping up to be a much better arrangement than she had initially thought.

“Understood, Master. I will be more considerate in the future.”

But she forgot about one very important aspect of this ‘arrangement.’

“Good. Now is snack time!”

She had slighted a master who knew no compassion or mercy and had yet to be punished for it.

“Eh? Huh? But I- ” she tried to plead her case, but it was too late. The red tongue was already coiled around her feet while she was still on the ground. It pulled them into its open maw, dragging the succubus’s cushiony rump across the floor. She watched in abject horror as the mismatched rows of teeth slammed shut, biting her legs off in one move.

“Aaaaaargh!” she screamed.

[You have been dismembered. HP -83.]
[Maximum HP reduced by 75.]

“My fucking legs! Nnnngh! Why is it always with the legs?! Haaaahn!”

She wailed in half-pain half-pleasure while rolling around on the ground. It was impossible to get used to the pain and shock of having her limbs violently ripped off no matter how many times it happened. The stumps of her legs let out crimson blood all over the floor, but not as much as one would expect. A demon’s body was a construct of flesh, muscle and bone. They did not possess a large number of the internal organs one would expect from a living being, like the heart, liver, kidneys or intestines. The blood they let out when injured was more or less decorative, too. They wouldn’t just up and die from having a leg or two chopped off, but it still hurt like a bitch.

That inhuman vitality was almost a curse in Xera’s case. It meant she wouldn’t get the brief reprieve of an easy ‘death’ that easily. Even then she’d just be re-summoned and re-eaten time and time again until her master was satisfied.

Of course, this initial dismemberment was simply the beginning. The Mimic spent the next several minutes slowly and meticulously chewing on her various bits until she was banished back to the Beyond. Some weird juice

squirted out from her lower half a few times during the process. The oblivious chest still had no idea what that was even though it happened regularly during snack time. It just assumed it was part of her being a demon and didn't particularly mind it.

Why would it? The slimy liquid was just as sweet as the rest of her, after all.

Part Three

Xera was brought back to ‘life’ a mere ten seconds and 260 MP later. The succubus had fully prepared herself for yet more snack time, but it seemed like that wasn’t on the Mimic’s immediate agenda.

“Wait here,” it commanded.

“Yes, Master.”

It seemed that the Mimic would be using its corpse-related Skill on those four. It sat right next to the pile of corpses and a number of transparent purple tentacles appeared from its faux-wood surface. They pierced one of the bodies and swiftly drank what little remained of its flesh, leaving behind little more than a pile of chunky ash. It was a scene the succubus had seen multiple times, so she was loosely aware of what was going on, including the hefty MP cost of that weird Skill. That would explain why it didn’t want to devour her over and over right now - it would much rather eat those corpses than eat her.

Xera felt slightly irked at this realization. This wasn’t because she was disappointed that ‘snack time’ did not continue, okay? It’s not possible to be jealous of a bunch of dried up skeletons, alright? She just felt awkward that her master was taking her sloppy seconds like that and didn’t particularly want to stare at the gruesome act, so she spun around and waited for it to finish.

The Mimic was likewise sitting patiently, waiting for its MP to recover. The first use of Cadaver Absorption failed as expected, but at least the Skill seemed to be usable on these leftovers. It seriously doubted the Skill would demonstrate its full effects, however. These corpses technically had everything attached, but they looked even less delectable than those ghouls. Still, it wouldn’t do to just pass them over.

However, the MP limitation was getting to be a problem. The INT stat was growing steadily, but WIS was falling behind, meaning the automatic recovery was lacking. This wasn’t an immediate concern since the Mimic was in no particular rush and it didn’t mind sitting idly while the MP recovery did its thing, but that didn’t mean this would always be the case. Xera, for example, became quite useless if she ran out of MP in the middle of a fight.

The animate chest had witnessed the sight of its familiar running out of MP just before she could finish off the ghoul. The undead creature had leaped on top of her and ended up seriously injuring her body. It very nearly killed her before the Mimic could slice it into ribbons. It had to stop playing with its gold to do that, which made it a bit irritable. This was not a particularly tasty situation, but it proved a point. Running out of MP in combat could mean death. And if the Mimic should need to use magic to fight, then it would run dry extremely quickly.

"Snack," it called. "I want more magic."

The bare-bones explanation somehow managed to get its point across, giving the demoness a good idea of what it was talking about. She hated to admit it, but she was getting better at translating from Mimicanese.

The succubus was keenly aware of the MP issues that all Warlocks faced. How could she not be? Every single one of her previous masters was a Warlock, after all.

"Have you tried using a staff?" she suggested.

If it were any other Warlock, they might think she was patronizing them. However, Xera was being dead serious. She had no doubt that the idiotic chest she called a master did not even consider something so basic.

"Is staff tasty?" it asked quizzically, confirming that Xera's educated guess was dead on.

"It's like a sword for magic," she explained using her smallest words. "Holding one when using Spells can increase their damage or reduce their MP cost, depending on the quality of it."

"So... tasty?"

"Yes, Master. Tasty," she confirmed with a sarcastic tone. This time she **was** patronizing it. Not like the moron would notice the not-so-subtle meaning hidden in her voice anyway.

"Good! How do I get the tasty thing?"

"Here, one of these guys had a staff."

She picked up the weapon in question off the floor and presented it to her master. It almost looked like a walking stick when compared to her fancy, albeit fake staff, but it was a Caster staff nonetheless. The apple-sized blue

crystal ball at the top of the plain wooden shaft was evidence enough to that effect.

“This? Ah, I’ve eaten many of those. Not very tasty,” it said dismissively.

This time it was speaking literally. Wood did slightly fill up its belly, but the flavor was not at all to its liking. Not bad, but also not good would be the way to describe it.

“Master, you don’t eat this,” pointed out Xera. “You just hold it when casting magic.”

“Like Snack does?”

“Yes, Master. Just like-”

Realization hit her and she stilled her tongue, but it was too late. Words spoken out loud could not be taken back. And indeed, the Mimic accepted the staff from the succubus’s hands using its own version of her own hands. The albino mockery of Xera’s true form had appeared from inside the chest before she even realized what was going on. Seeing it curiously hold a staff the wrong way around made it even harder for her to watch.

“Fffffuuuuuuck!” screamed the real Xera while turning around as quickly as she could. However, this time she was more upset at herself rather than the Mimic. Of course it would do things exactly like her, right down to the body. She walked into that one all on her own.

Swish swish

She could hear it swinging its new toy around. But then she had a thought which brought chills down her spine. It probably wanted to try out its new weapon. And there were no suitable targets around, except for one.

“Shadowbolt ~♪!” came her own oddly cheery-sounding voice from behind. In the next instant, she was hit in the back by the Spell in question.

[You have been hit by a mass of darkness. HP -88.]

Xera screamed in pain while falling to her knees. Sticky demon blood and flesh flew around the place as the Shadowbolt took a literal piece out of her lower back. She couldn’t see it, but she could feel it. Right now her lower back was missing a chunk of flesh roughly the size of a fist.

But the Mimic wasn't done. It dropped the staff on the ground with a slight clattering sound.

"Shadowbolt ~♪!" it called out again.

[You have been hit by a mass of darkness. HP -82.]

The Mimic verified that the Spell was ever so slightly stronger with the staff equipped. It didn't seem to reduce the MP cost, but it was still something! It picked the weapon back up and did a little celebratory dance. Its spider legs tilted the milky-white, chest-bound woman left and right while she held the staff above her head with both hands. The massive milky-white breasts swung left and right indecently. It also started chanting "Staff is tasty ~♪! Staff is tasty ~♪!" over and over for no good reason.

Xera was becoming more and more mortified. She stared at the spectacle the same way one might stare at a hurricane. Her own oddly melodic voice was singing such an absolutely retarded tune while a mockery of her body was performing a fittingly childish 'dance.' Eventually she managed to tear her eyes away from whatever that was and turn away from it entirely.

"Please, just kill me now," she muttered sarcastically.

"Okay!" called out the Mimic in good humor. It was in a good mood, so it decided to grant the familiar this simple request.

Xera, understandably, immediately tried to stop it. "NO! I didn't mean-"

But it was too late. Words spoken out loud could not be taken back.

"Shadowbolt ~♪!"

[You have been hit by a mass of darkness. HP -88.]

"GUHAAAHA!" she screamed. That third spell to her back made her fall flat on her face.

"Hm? Still not dead?" asked the Mimic.

Indeed, she wasn't. She was barely alive with only 2 HP left.

"It's okay, I fix ~♪!" it added while walking closer to her.

Xera was too busy coughing up blood and red goop to protest. She could only turn her head just enough to see her own face looking down on her with

a dumb smile. Her master let out a “See you soon ~♪!” before bringing down the wooden shaft of its new staff towards her head.

Oddly enough, the succubus found herself mirroring that goofy smile right before the staff cracked her head open. She had realized that she was her own worst enemy. In more ways than one.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

The Mimic, on the other hand, was happy. It learned a new thing and helped its Snack out with a request. But then it got a bit sad when it realized it had used every last drop of its MP on that third Spell. That would delay the absorption process, not to mention it would need to summon its familiar yet again. Well, ultimately it just had to sit still and play with its coins while the automatic MP recovery did its thing, so it wasn’t that big of a deal.

Just to be sure, it double-checked its Status, but its Ruin Mastery didn’t budge. It seemed that using its own familiar as a punching bag wouldn’t actually raise its Mastery Skills. Well, she was born of its own MP so doing that was more or less like hitting itself. Which, it knew for a fact, also couldn’t be used to train up Skills.

And so it spent the next half hour or so idly regenerating its MP while playing with the gold coins. First it summoned back Xera and told her to keep checking the camp for anything else that looked useful. Then it absorbed one more corpse, which ended in another failure. The third one, however, was a hit.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a moderate success!]
[12% of the target’s highest Skill Proficiency has been added to your own.]
[The body’s deteriorated condition has weakened this effect by 40%.]
[Proficiency level increased. Dagger Mastery is now Level 2. STR +2. DEX +6.]

The Skill itself was not that great, but the Attribute gains were tasty. Now that the Mimic thought about it, it was still carrying that oddly shiny dagger it had picked up when it was still Level 10. It used the fake Xera’s white hand to reach into its Storage and pull it out. The weapon in question had a deep blue gemstone embedded in the pommel. The short steel blade glistened with an unnatural light blue sheen and a faint icy fog drifted down from it.

This was a magic weapon, enchanted with the power of ice. Anyone stabbed by this would have their insides freeze over, causing additional HP damage. The downside was that it needed more maintenance than plain steel blades, not to mention it was almost five times more expensive. The simple Mimic obviously had no idea about any of this. It was just coveting the shiny thing that looked like a tiny sword.

However, now that it had the knowledge of Dagger Mastery, it realized this short blade was more suited to ambushing targets. It could be thrust in and out of flesh with much greater ease and speed. Xera's white, tender hand changed into a grotesque red tongue-tentacle as it gave the weapon a few experimental swings. The actual Xera stiffened up when she heard the familiar swishing sounds, but felt relief wash over her when it became obvious it didn't feel like stabbing her.

Well, not for the moment, at least.

After some more waiting around, Xera had finished checking all the belongings.

"I've found a few… 'tasty' things, Master," she reported.

"Show me!" it replied eagerly.

"They were carrying a few low-grade Healing Potions. Er, you do know what a Healing Potion is, right?"

"Yes," it confirmed. "Glass thing with liquid. Gives HP when I eat it. Moderately tasty."

It was already familiar with this alchemical product. A few of those potions were present in the satchels and pockets of its previous victims and spilled out into its mouth while it chewed on the remains.

"Oh, okay. Here they are."

Xera held out three crystal vials. The Mimic put them in its mouth, crunched down on them and swallowed. Just because it knew what potions were didn't mean it realized it could have saved them for later. Food was meant to be eaten before it got all rotten and un-tasty, after all.

As for the succubus, she felt herself die a little on the inside. Just when she thought that chest would behave rationally, it proved her wrong. Her naivete proved she was still overestimating it. Or underestimating, depending on the

point of view. All that was left for her to do was let out yet another sigh before continuing with her findings.

“There were also two swords over there that you’d probably like.”

She pointed to the unsheathed blades on the ground a few meters away from her. The simple blades looked practically brand new. The Mimic was quite enthusiastic about this as the ones it had were woefully unmaintained and horribly over-used. They were blunted, rusted, and seemed like they would snap in half any day now.

“I also found some more gold for you - 63 GP in total.”

Next, she took out a small purse and dumped out its contents in a careless manner, causing dozens of glittering coins to pour out of it. They hit the brick-covered ground with a bit of a racket, then bounced or rolled all over the place. Rather than being annoyed, the Mimic simply marveled at the sight until the last bit of gold came to a complete rest. It began picking them up one by one with great glee, carefully appraising each piece before putting it safely away inside its Storage.

Most of them were tiny ones, barely bigger than a thumbnail and just as thick. A good number of them were also slightly bent from changing hands so many times. These were Serf pieces worth 1 GP each. The rest were about twice as large in diameter and a tiny bit thicker, not to mention shinier due to the higher degree of gold purity. These ones were called Knight pieces, each of which had a value of 5 GP.

“They had a map, too,” added Xera with a tinge of hope in her voice. “The thing you’re looking for is actually less than a minute away from here.”

However, saving what she believed to be the best news for last proved to be a mistake. The Mimic was too enthralled by the shiny things to pay her any attention. Eventually it calmed down enough to process the good news. After she repeated them, of course. It still had one more corpse to absorb, though, so it went over to do just that.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a minor success!]
[12% of the target’s highest Attribute has been added to your own.]
[The body’s deteriorated condition has weakened this effect by 40%.]
[The Charisma (CHR) Attribute has been created through a special action. CHR +7.]

It quickly verified this mysterious new addition to its Status.

[Charisma (CHR)]
Slightly increases your attractiveness.

If it was the Mimic from two weeks ago, it would definitely scoff at this seemingly useless Attribute, but the present one knew better. It considered how effective Snack was at deceiving others with her looks, and knew firsthand how useful such a thing could be. If it could become an irresistible treasure chest as a result of this Attribute, then it would undoubtedly be much easier to fool its prey. After all, it thrived on ambushing those blinded by greed, so something like this was sure to be useful.

Unfortunately, the monster was being a bit too optimistic for its own good. Even with 10,000 CHR it would at most appear to be just a really clean and sparkly treasure chest, which wouldn't have the sort of effect on people that it was imagining. This Attribute had almost no impact on how an inanimate object looked, after all. It would be a different story for someone who was naturally beautiful, however. For example, if Xera had a five-figure CHR Attribute she could make both men and women alike fall madly and hopelessly in love with her with just a glance. A wink and a smile would make them orgasm on the spot. Indeed, entire kingdoms would willingly line up to receive the honor of having their life sucked out of them by such an unimaginable beauty.

In short, the only way CHR would be useful to the Mimic right now was if it gained a new Job that could make use of this Attribute. Even if it morphed into half-a-Xera, the lower half of that form would be a dead giveaway to anyone with half a brain that it was a monster. Indeed, it would probably attract more oblivious 'customers' if it just stuck with its tried-and-true chesty visage.

Now that all four corpses were gobbled up and its MP was mostly replenished, it decided it was time to move out. It went over to where Xera was waiting. The bored succubus picked herself up off the ground when she noticed her master approach.

"We go," said the Mimic. "Show me where the Dungeon Core is."

Part Four

Just as Xera had said, the heart of the dungeon was quite close by the little camp those adventurers had made. It was clearly marked on the hand-drawn map they had brought with them. A significant portion of the labyrinthine corridors had been mapped out in great detail, which looked odd considering how uneven and smudged the lines on it were. It was legible, but barely.

Xera guessed this was something those four had copied for themselves, but that was beside the point. Even as poor quality as it was, the place where her master wanted to go was plainly visible. Their destination was the only unmapped portion of the dungeon, with the words ‘Do not enter’ scribbled in the blank space. And the two of them were standing at a T-shaped junction, right on the edge of that space.

Behind them was the way they came. To the right was a path that would take them nowhere in particular. The way to the left stretched out into a straight corridor that led into the uncharted heart of this dungeon. It looked pretty much exactly like the rest of the underground maze - stone brick walls and floor, creepy statues and carvings visible along the wall and ghostly torches providing just enough blue light to make their presence known. It was easy to see how someone might enter this place by accident if they didn’t have one of these maps.

Which was probably why ‘DO NOT ENTER’ was written in large blocky letters on either side of the passage in question with an eye-catching yellow paint. Grimy and steadily peeling off, but eye-catching nonetheless.

“The core should be down this way, Master,” said the succubus.

The Mimic stopped playing with its expanded collection of gold coins and, much to her relief, shifted back into its combat stance, swords at the ready.

“Go in front,” it ordered.

“Understood, Master.”

It sent its familiar ahead so that she could be bait for any ambushes or traps. Even if she was much more fragile than itself, she could still be used as a meat shield. After all, she was expendable and her death would be an inconvenience at most.

Also, the Mimic was more than a little worried about friendly fire. It had plenty of opportunity to watch Xera use her magic throughout the dungeon, so it knew full well just how out of control those Pyroclasm Spells could get. Being in that pyromaniac's line of fire was not an attractive prospect, to say the least. So it went against the common sense of adventuring parties and put the vulnerable Caster Job at the front.

The succubus walked about fifteen meters in front of her master like she had been doing until now. However, unlike before, it was being strangely silent. She found herself looking over her shoulder a few times to make sure it was still following her. The way that animate chest followed made for a rather unsettling sight. Even the experienced demoness found the way it was quietly gliding along on those eight spider legs to be a bit creepy. If someone were to see the two of them right now, they'd undoubtedly misunderstand the situation as a monster stalking an innocent young woman.

The corridor itself went on straight for a while and had several left turns, but there were no intersections with other tunnels. Rather than a maze, this part of the dungeon was more akin to a spiral. Eventually, the corridor ended in a rather plain stone archway with a wide hall on the other side of it. The rectangular chamber was far more spacious when compared to the rest of the dungeon, more than thirty meters on each side. Four wide stone columns were spaced out evenly around the interior, likely holding up the four meter tall ceiling.

And right in the middle of the room, on top of a circular marble altar, was the core - a glowing red crystal ball, roughly one meter in diameter. At first glance it seemed to be sitting on top of its pedestal, but a closer inspection revealed it was actually floating ever so slightly above it.

Xera entered the room boldly, her footsteps echoing throughout the chamber. Her master skittered in silently behind her shortly after. As the succubus approached the core on the Mimic's orders, she heard a strange whimper and a rustling of chains. Looking to her right, she saw what appeared to be a young human girl still in her mid-to-late teens, chained up against the pillar.

The prisoner was sitting on the ground with arms bound tightly above her head by thick, rusty shackles and chains. Her long, black, oily hair was stuck to her face, obscuring part of her features. She was wearing what appeared to be leather armor that was mostly in tatters and left much of her pale, bruised

skin exposed. The odd posture she was in emphasized her moderately-sized, albeit perky breasts.

“Please! Help me!” she shouted with a voice halfway between a plea and a cry.

“Sure,” replied the ‘adventurer’ with a smile on her face.

“Really? You’ll release me?”

“Yep! Release you from life, that is!”

“... Huh?”

“Fireball!”

The sudden Spell crashed into the stone pillar, wrapping the lowest part of it in a plume of bright red flames.

“What are you doing?!” screamed the prisoner.

“I could ask you the same thing, hmm?”

In the split second between chanting the Spell and it hitting its target, the black-haired girl had slipped out of her restraints and climbed up onto the pillar to avoid it. She was sticking to the smooth stone bricks while upside down with her arms and legs spread out, like a cross between a human, a frog and a cockroach.

“Ah,” she exclaimed after realizing the position she was in.

Xera smiled mischievously. “Good evening, miss Dungeon Master.”

The ‘prisoner’ clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “Tch, figured me out did you?”

“Puh-lease, honey. I knew the instant I heard you. You’re five hundred years too early to try to deceive the likes of me!”

“Hyu hyu hyu hyu hyu!” came the odd laugh. “That’s why I love humans! They always spout such nonsense right before-”

The girl, or rather the thing that looked like a girl was rudely interrupted by another Fireball that flew straight at her face. She leaped off the pillar and landed to the ground with a small roll, while implying Xera was prone to having intimate relations with a horse. Incidentally, there was that one time that involved a centaur, so technically speaking she was half-right.

The Dungeon Master ran straight at the succubus, crossing the ten or so meters between them in less than a second. She punched her in the throat to interrupt her chanting and swept her off her feet in the next instant. Xera landed on her back with a thud and a yelp, dropping her staff in the process. Her attacker immediately straddled her stomach and pinned her wrists to the floor. She loomed over her captive victim with a triumphant smile on her face.

“-right before I eat them,” she finished.

The black-haired woman’s mouth opened unnaturally wide like her jaw had been unhinged. A slimy and oddly familiar tongue poured out of it. She probingly licked Xera’s face, then retracted the tentacle-like organ inside herself with a smack of her lips.

“Hyu hyu hyu hyu! You’re quite tasty, you know that?”

“I have been told that before, yes.”

The Dungeon Master’s eyes widened with surprise and she leaped forward, releasing Xera from her grip. A trio of blades sliced through the space she was occupying mere moments before.

“Huck!” cursed the Mimic. Its ambush was dodged and the opportunity to use Assassinate was now gone. It wasted so much time maneuvering into the right position, too!

“Master!” shouted Xera through the thought-link. “Why didn’t you use magic?”

“... Ah!”

Xera could almost see the proverbial lightbulb go off in its mind when it did that. She silently asked herself if this retard had forgotten that it could use magic, but immediately let go of that pointless question. Now was not the time for such thoughts. She quickly scrambled to her feet and picked up her staff.

The Dungeon Master had already retreated to a safe distance of about eighteen meters. The creature before them had reverted back to its base form, revealing its identity as a monster. The head, arms and legs still retained their human appearance. Even the hair was the same unruly collection of black strands that naturally draped over her face. However, the

skin was so white and flawless that one could easily mistake it for porcelain. This illusion was solidified by the pure white eyes that had no irises.

However, what clearly set her apart as a monster was what she was 'wearing.' The ruined leather trappings had transformed into what appeared to be a pile of meat and bone masquerading as a loose-fitting strapless dress. A grotesque collection of blood-red muscles, distended blood vessels and even a few misshapen eyes covered its surface. They seemed to crawl and pulsate all on their own. The horrifying garment had a short skirt made out of red flesh that had several misshapen human-like teeth poking out of it at random. It hung down to the monster's knees, allowing the bare, pale feet underneath to practically shimmer in the dim lighting.

This was indeed, as Xera guessed, the Dungeon Master. She was a Fleshmaiden, an intelligent and cunning shapeshifter that liked dark and damp places. Once one of these had established a lair, they would practically shut themselves inside it. It was a reclusive species that did not enjoy being out in the open at all. However, those who would dare intrude on this monster's sanctum would not be allowed to escape with their lives. Which is probably why the only entrance to the room was sealed shut by a stone slab that rose up from the ground.

"I see," she said in a calm, clear monotone while glaring at the Mimic. "You brought one of mine."

The monstrous woman thought of herself as the mother of all creatures in this dungeon. That notion was not entirely true, but it wasn't entirely false either. Indeed, the only reason that Mimics started appearing in this dungeon was because the Fleshmaiden had taken control of its core. The glowing crystal ball that served as the heart of this place was influenced by its new owner, prompting the dungeon to spawn the only shapeshifting species of monster it could. That was, of course, merely the beginning. Eventually the whole underground labyrinth would evolve and change to suit its new ruler, including the walls and layout of the place.

"A strong one, too," she continued. "Isn't this the same child that grew too large for this place? You're controlling it, aren't you?"

"Found me out, did you?" smiled Xera. This creature in front of her was clearly misunderstanding the way their master-servant relationship worked and the succubus had no intention of dispelling it.

Her master, on the other hand, was too busy sizing up its prey to bother with the chit chat. The thing in front was clearly not human, but a shapeshifter much like itself. This meant the insides were vastly different from the outside, so traditional weak points like the heart, head, throat and lungs were unlikely to work.

The Fleshmaiden reached inside the folds of her ‘dress’ and pulled out a pair of mithril daggers, one in each hand. The silver-like blades glistened forebodingly with an oddly green sheen.

“You whore!” she wailed while lowering her stance. “How dare you take what is mine!”

She charged forward with the same abnormal speed she displayed earlier, clearly aiming to finish off the troublesome magic user first. However, she was blocked by the same trio of blades she dodged less than a minute ago. They thrust through the space she was going to be in if she didn’t immediately skid to a halt.

The Fleshmaiden’s mind rapidly changed gears at that. Even though the swords themselves were not that great, the one wielding them could not be underestimated. If the Assassination attempt from earlier succeeded she would undoubtedly be in a bad spot. However, one does not simply sneak up on a Fleshmaiden. They’re way too paranoid to trust only one pair of eyes and always have an extra two or three of them along their bodies, covering all possible angles. Indeed, she had picked out the skulking chest almost immediately, but did not expect it to attack her rather than the person she was holding down.

And the Mimic would do that again. It took the initiative and pressed the attack. The flurry of tentacle-guided blades struck at the Fleshmaiden, but they were all repelled. She had parried all the blows beautifully even though she only had two blades to the Mimic’s three. It didn’t stop there and kept swinging wildly at her, coming at her from all sorts of awkward angles. All its previous opponents were overwhelmed by this approach, but they were only human. The Fleshmaiden’s arms and hands moved with superior speed and skill while bending and stretching in ways no human arm could ever manage. She was able to stand her ground against the chaotic onslaught.

The two kept exchanging blows as sparks flew off and metal-on-metal clanging reverberated through the chamber. Xera was left with nothing to do

in the meantime. Her master had given her a strict order to not use any magic near it, so she was unable to do anything in this situation. Indeed, the chaotic nature of her flames was one of the ways she used to 'accidentally' torch one of her previous masters. But that was then, this was now. And right now, she was left with no way of attacking, regardless of her intentions. This was also likely the Fleshmaiden's plan since Casters would hesitate to fire on their own allies.

However, it still meant that Xera was left undisturbed for the moment. She seized her chance and ran off towards the core, clearly aiming to secure her prize while the current Dungeon Master was held at bay.

Her intentions did not slip the Fleshmaiden's notice. The dagger-wielding monster decided to kick things up a notch and stop that infuriating woman from trying anything funny. Truthfully, even though she appeared to have her hands full, she was simply taking a cautious wait-and-see approach with her opponent. Her superior speed and excellent kinetic vision gave her quite a bit of breathing room.

She saw a gap within the Mimic's wild swings and managed to thrust her dagger through it. The sharp blade cut into the tongue on her left, sinking in about halfway through it and causing it to stop its movements. She followed up with another strike to the same place, severing it completely. The slimy red tongue and the sword it was gripping both fell to the ground with a sputter of gooey yellow blood.

One down, two to go.

Reeling at the sudden loss of limb, the Mimic didn't have time to react before the middle one was sliced off with three successive strikes. It realized the opponent's aim and reeled in the last tentacle while pulling back, but the Fleshmaiden would not allow that. She swung down fiercely with her whole upper body, chopping it off just moments before it disappeared inside the Mimic's mouth.

However, while it was by no means a bad move to disarm her opponent, she ended up narrowing her attention on the swords a bit too much. Her rushed downward swing had left her slightly off balance and within centimeters of the Mimic's natural weapons. It swiftly tied its other two tongue-tentacles around her shoulder and neck, pulling on her fiercely while lunging forward.

It sank its jagged, misaligned teeth deep into her side, causing the Fleshmaiden to wail in agony. Her right arm, shoulder and the side of her torso were all inside the Mimic's maw. But so was her dagger. She thrust it upwards, piercing clean through the roof of its mouth. The mithril blade stuck out from the inside of the imitation wood lid like an oversized nail. Satisfied with the hiss of pain from her opponent, the Fleshmaiden tried to pull it out and keep stabbing the insides of its mouth.

However, it wouldn't budge. The monster had reflexively tightened the muscles around it, locking it in place. It also wasn't quite done with the piece of meat stuck in its teeth. It reared up on its spider legs, lifting the captive Fleshmaiden off the ground. It then swung her around to its side like a wet rag before slamming her down on the floor with a disgusting wet thud. The force of the impact severed what little flesh connected the right side of its victim's upper torso to the rest of her.

At least that's what it seemed like. The Fleshmaiden had willingly detached herself from those jaws, much like a lizard shedding its tail to escape. She rolled on the ground and scrambled to her feet. Her quick wits once again re-evaluated the situation. While she did have the upper hand in speed and dexterity, her opponent had her outclassed when it came to raw power and durability. Facing it head-on was not impossible, but it was a much wiser decision to cut off its reason to fight. Her new position put her in a perfect spot to bypass the still-reeling Mimic and take care of that troublesome Pyromancer.

The woman in question was busy banging on the transparent pink barrier the dungeon core had thrown up to protect itself. It was an automated security system of sorts. There was no way the core would allow anyone except its rightful owner to approach it, after all. And while it wasn't capable of keeping that shield up indefinitely, it would still take a long time to break through.

The Fleshmaiden made up her mind and charged swiftly at the girl. Xera noticed her approach and immediately began chanting a Spell, but she didn't make it in time. The gap between them was closed in almost an instant and a mithril dagger was stuck deep into her chest. Right where her heart would have been if she was human.

“I will have you pay for what you’ve done!” growled the Fleshmaiden while twisting her blade further inside her target. However, the face her victim made wasn’t one twisted by pain or the fear of death. Quite the opposite in fact. She was smiling with a wide, shit-eating grin that was proud of pulling off an elaborate prank. She dropped her staff and gripped the dumbfounded Fleshmaiden’s arm with both hands.

“Inferno,” she said, finishing her chant.

A swirling mass of fire enveloped them, burning away at both of their bodies. And even though they got the same treatment, they had wildly different reactions. The Fleshmaiden wailed in pain while the demon laughed maniacally.

That’s the trouble when dealing with immortal beings - they don’t hesitate to self-destruct. It didn’t help that the being in question was also a masochistic pyromaniac on top of being a summoned demon. If anything, it was a surprise she lasted an entire week since her ‘awakening’ before she thought of setting herself on fire.

The Inferno did not last long, however. The Fleshmaiden was a resilient monster that would not give in so easily. She pulled her hand free and stabbed the Succubus three more times in rapid succession before her HP was completely depleted, cutting the effects of the Spell short. Xera’s charred body fell to the ground while giving her killer the finger in a final act of defiance. It then broke apart into bright purple particles that faded away into nothingness.

The Mimic had already recovered as best as it could. The cut off tentacles were regrown and the mithril dagger was safely put away into Storage. It hesitated to approach the burning figure of the Fleshmaiden, however. Fire was a natural enemy of both wooden treasure chests and living things in general, so it was wary of approaching her.

When Xera’s Devouring Flames faded away a few seconds later, it revealed a shocking scene. The Fleshmaiden’s burnt and charred skin was healing itself. The bitten off portion of her torso as well as her right arm were growing back rapidly. She raised her left arm, pointing the dagger towards the Mimic.

“You’re next, traitor!” she bellowed.

[General Information]
Puddy
Fleshmaiden, Female, 8 years old
Level 25.00 Slime
Level 19.57 Fleshshaper
407/407 HP (+0.7/sec)
619/865 MP (+1.4/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 47, DEX 104, AGI 110, END 72, INT 173, WIS 93, PER 31

Part Five

The Fleshmaiden may have been fooled by her own hubris at first, but she quickly realized the woman she had killed was not actually human. There's no way she would have shrugged off a dagger to the heart like that if she was. The subsequent self-destruction proved that point even further. After all, humans were creatures that clung desperately to life. She respected that, though. You wouldn't last in this world without the resolve to fight tooth, nail and tentacle for your survival.

The bottom line was that Pyromancer was a monster, which meant she was actually cooperating with the Mimic. The chest had attacked her out of its own free will. It may even have been the mastermind behind this little invasion into her lair. Her guess was spot on, although 'mastermind' was giving it entirely too much credit.

Regardless, it had much to answer for. She even lost one of her trusty mithril daggers to it, but that was okay. All she had to do was carve it out of its wood-like hide.

And so, once the flames had subsided, the Fleshmaiden threatened the monster. Of course, that was entirely to help heal her injured ego. After all, throwing words like 'traitor' at a moronic chest was about as useful as pissing against the wind.

Leaving such stupid thoughts aside, she charged at it while swinging her dagger wildly. The Mimic had already regrown its tentacles and picked up its dropped weapons, so it was ready for her. Or so it thought. The Fleshmaiden ran straight through the trio of sword strikes. One was turned away by her dagger, the second cut open her unarmed left hand and the final one left a gash on her shoulder. She ignored the wounds and got right next to the chest-shaped body and stabbed at it with her remaining dagger.

The instant she thrust her arm forward it opened its maw and threatened to eat her whole. The Fleshmaiden was forced to stop her attack and pull back, lest she lose her other weapon as well. The sudden change in momentum made her stagger, which was just enough for the Mimic to drive all three swords into her shoulder, torso and thigh, depriving her of a devastating 235 HP. She pulled away from it in a panic, but the Mimic was holding its swords with all its might and tried to pull her into the opposite direction,

towards its waiting maw. The girl-shaped monster's malleable flesh was ripped apart violently, sending indeterminate bits of red flesh and sprays of crimson blood flying all over the place. It hurt like a bitch and cost her even more HP, but she managed to escape for the moment.

The Fleshmaiden had to admit she was underestimating it. Even in the middle of a fight it still found a way to surprise her with an attack that was almost enough to kill her outright. She hated to acknowledge it, but that thing's combat instincts were the real deal. Even now it sensed her weakened state and chased after her, trying to finish the job.

The huge wound on her thigh meant the normally faster Fleshmaiden could not run as freely as before and she would surely be caught on flat ground. So she leaped at the nearby stone wall and stuck to it using adhesive slime secreted from her palms and feet. She clambered up the four-meter tall surface, attempting to put some distance between herself and her pursuer. Even a few seconds would be enough to pull herself away from death's door.

However, the chest vehemently chased her. It skittered up the wall after her using its imitation spider legs as makeshift climbing picks. It stabbed their hard, chitin-covered tips between the roughly hewn stone bricks, creating just enough of a hole in the aging mortar to make a foothold. It was a crude method that it thought of roughly three seconds ago, but it was reasonably effective.

Its prey expected this development, however. After all, would it really be that strange for a half-spider half-chest to climb along the wall? Granted the method it used was vastly different from how actual spiders climbed walls, but that was beside the point. The Fleshmaiden stopped going upwards and instead turned ninety degrees to the right and moved quickly to the side.

The rapid change in direction slowed down the determined Mimic even further. Try as it might, it had no chance of catching her under these conditions. It briefly considered dropping off and firing Spells after her, but it was a risky move. Its opponent already proved to be more than capable of dodging or interrupting magic, so the Mimic had serious doubts as to whether it would be able to get a shot off. To make matters worse, the deep wounds it had left on that woman's body were already closing up as if time was running backwards.

This is not tasty.

The chest knew a thing or two about shapeshifting. Replacing lost limbs or closing up wounds did not recover lost HP. The severed flesh and spilled blood both needed time to recover. Damaged tissue, on the other hand, was still there even if the wound wasn't visible on the surface. The most it could do with its current Skills was to supplement the missing bits of its limbs by shifting Biomass around or force its wounds closed so they wouldn't bleed as much.

But what this Fleshmaiden was doing was beyond that. She was regenerating. It looked similar, but any shapeshifter worth its tentacles would be able to grasp the difference. She didn't simply shuffle flesh around. Entirely new muscle tissue grew rapidly on the spot, allowing her to restore both her body and her HP at the same time. Whether this effect was due to a Skill, a Spell, or came from the power of the dungeon core was a complete mystery to the Mimic. But one thing was crystal clear.

This situation is very much not tasty!

Once the female monster had recovered enough, she did a hundred and eighty degree turn while still clinging to the wall. She swung around one hand like she was an unreasonably fast clock and used that momentum to slice two of the Mimic's front spider legs off in one slash. The animate chest, deprived of two of its anchors, lost its balance and fell towards the ground. It just barely managed to kick off the wall and rotate itself in a three-quarter circle so that it landed squarely on its legs, the missing ones already being rebuilt out of spare Biomass.

The Fleshmaiden leaped down immediately afterwards with her body in perfect health. She pressed the attack, but this time she did not rush in carelessly. She fought on the edge of the Mimic's range, stabbing away at its tongues or legs. It retaliated by slashing away at her limbs in turn. It grazed her a few times but failed to land a telling blow on its quicker, more agile opponent. She didn't make things easy, either, and kept running around it in circles, constantly hounding it at all sides and not giving it a single moment to rest. The Mimic used its magical perception to track her position and its flexible tongues swirled around it, covering it on all sides. And while it didn't have any blind spots per se, it still struggled to keep up with her movements.

And so the two reached a sort of stalemate. One ran in circles and struck at any tentacles or spider legs she could reach. The other one responded in kind and aimed at her arms and feet. It even managed to chop them off a few times, but the Fleshmaiden took a page out of its own book and replaced them swiftly through shape-shifting. Her seemingly endless regeneration would undoubtedly restore her HP afterwards.

Severed limbs rained down in the area around them as they sliced at each other's bodies. Indeed, the surreal scene was a duel between monsters - creatures with enough vitality to fight until their last drop of HP was gone. And looking at the way things were, the Mimic was undoubtedly going to be the first to fall. Even though it did almost twice as much damage as its more nimble opponent, it was still not enough. The enemy kept regenerating at a rate that was much faster than what it could dish out, but had no way of recovering its own HP. The Fleshmaiden had the clear upper hand in a battle of attrition like this.

Then why did she not do this at the start? If she was this strong, why did she feel the need to block the Mimic's blows and deprive it of its weapons? Was it because she wanted to kill off the Mimic's Snack? No, that was certainly the cause of it. After all, taking out the magical support first was something the Mimic desperately tried to do. But Xera clearly was an offense-type Caster, which meant her magic was a bigger threat.

This is regret?

The Mimic had passed on not one, but two whole chances to hit the Fleshmaiden with its own magic. It was possible that the high output of Warlock Spells might be able to overpower that regeneration, but there was no chance to use it now. The chest was under too much pressure, it couldn't focus on casting magic like this.

Regret is not tasty!

In fact, the current situation was so un-tasty it almost made it want to puke in disgust. Things could not be allowed to carry on this way, otherwise it would surely be killed off. Therefore, it had to change the circumstances so they became more favorable. Much like how it desperately threw that spear during its struggle against the guard patrol, it needed to create an opening where one did not exist. It hastily threw together a plan that just might work, then put it into action.

The first step was, essentially, the same thing it did against those guards.

Over on the Fleshmaiden's side, things were going according to plan. She could only inflict ten to twenty HP worth of damage with her glancing strikes. After all, she was slashing at thin limbs rather than stabbing at hearts, so her damage was quite low. Still, she was quite confident she wouldn't lose. Her miraculous regeneration was the product of her Mend Flesh Skill. It allowed her to essentially convert her massive MP pool into HP. Like this, she was completely safe as long as her MP held out and she avoided getting in dangerous spots that could overwhelm the speed of her regeneration. In the worst case scenario where she ran out of MP, she could still run around the room for a few minutes until she recovered a sizable chunk of it.

But it would seem that was not necessary. The Mimic had swung down at her with too much force and missed her completely. Its sword slammed against the ground and broke off at the handle. The Fleshmaiden smiled at this development. One sword less meant it could no longer attack nor defend as vigorously as it had until now. So far it had managed to keep picking up its weapons with regrown tentacles while keeping her at bay with the other two, but one of those was now useless.

The monster had permanently disarmed itself in its own over-eagerness.

The Fleshmaiden would not let this chance slip by. She moved in closer and, while staying wary of those teeth, cut clean through one of the tentacles, albeit at the price of a sword strike to the right side of her face. It didn't deter her and she cut off the last tentacle, drastically cutting down on the Mimic's attack range. It then predictably lunged at her in an attempt to bite her, but she was well prepared for it this time. The flesh-draped woman dodged nimbly to the left, going around its narrow side where those jaws had no way of reaching her. She was absolutely sure that nothing the Mimic could do would injure her in this position.

So imagine her surprise when she felt a sharp pain in her right side. That last sword hit to her head took out two of her eyes that had yet to grow back. Her limited field of vision meant she didn't notice that the Mimic had stabbed her with her own mithril dagger. She had completely forgotten about the little 'present' she left inside its mouth during their first clash. But then the Mimic introduced yet another dagger to the situation, this one stabbed right

through her neck. A sensation of piercing cold spread through her throat as it began to ice over.

The Fleshmaiden had no idea where that last weapon came from, but she didn't have time to worry about it now. The weapons lodged in her started pulling her towards the Mimic, which undoubtedly wanted to eat her whole. Her instincts screamed at her to run the fuck away.

So she tried to pull away, much like the last time she was in this position. The dagger lodged in her side felt like it would slip out easily enough, but the one in her throat was different. The frozen wound caused by the enchanted weapon meant it was firmly stuck in place. It was an extreme decision, but she willingly detached her head to escape from the jaws of death that were rapidly approaching her.

The headless woman then ran away from danger at top speed. Most of the Fleshmaiden's many eyes were hidden inside her black hair. The only ones remaining were those on the front of her 'dress.' She had to sacrifice her hearing, her expanded field of view as well as a chunk of her HP to get away, but it was far better than being gobbled up. She could grow as many heads as she wanted, but no amount of regeneration would save her from being digested inside the Mimic's stomach.

And in a repeat of the last time this happened, she retreated up the wall. Her limited field of view was quickly rectified by several eyes that grew out of her back and shoulder. She was unused to creating eyes on those areas of her skin, so it took her an extra second to get them just right. It was important that she confirmed the distance between herself and the Mimic that was likely following her.

But when those eyes opened up, they revealed that she was wrong. The Mimic did not chase after her. Far from it, it didn't even budge from its spot. What it did was far more unsettling.

The Fleshmaiden immediately recognized the face of that infuriating Pyromancer from earlier. That bitch was supposed dead, so how come she was sticking halfway out of the Mimic?! The skin, eye and hair color were completely wrong, but there was no way she would mistake that shit-eating grin for someone else! But wait, there's more! The woman on the wall broke her tunnel vision away from that insufferable face and realized that the Great

White Whore was pointing a cheap-looking staff in her direction and a weird aura of crackling electricity surrounded her body.

If she still had ears, she might have heard the Mimic finish chanting its Spell.

“Ebonfire ~♪!”

Black flames enveloped the Fleshmaiden. The impossibly dark fire that erupted from her skin seemed to suck in what little light there was in the dark chamber. The Mimic couldn’t even see her skin inside that localized inferno.

[Your target has been afflicted with Ebonfire.]

The target in question fell to the ground, screaming like a banshee. She rolled around, desperately trying to put out the flames. But she could not, for they were coming out from beneath her skin. The Mend Flesh Skill was working overtime to try to keep her body alive, but any new flesh that formed was immediately burned away. The heat was intense enough to overpower her rapid regeneration.

[Your target’s soul burns away at their flesh. Target HP -140.]

Overcome with exhaustion, the Mimic’s spider legs gave out and the bottom of its chest-like body slammed against the ground. The half-a-Xera on top of it went limp and fell forward under the influence of the accurately reproduced oversized breasts.

[Your target’s soul burns away at their flesh. Target HP -140.]
[Proficiency level increased. Power Overwhelming is now Level 2. INT +4.]

It seemed that spending every last drop of its 520 MP in one go proved to have a side effect on its body, but it was worth it. The Mimic had managed to surprise its enemy by secretly taking out an enchanted weapon from its Storage. It knew that, once driven into a corner, the Fleshmaiden would flee at all costs. Even if it meant sacrificing parts of her body to do so. A strategy she has used twice already. So it aimed for her head and forced her to leave it behind. All that was to buy it enough time to prepare the nastiest attack it could muster - a supercharged Ebonfire Spell.

[Power Overwhelming]
The Warlock becomes a bastion of arcane might.

Requirements: Level 10 Warlock, Ruin Mastery, INT 60
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 20 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Ruin Spells will cost 400% more MP.
Ruin Spells will be 200% more effective.
The Ruin Spell effectiveness multiplier will increase by an additional 20% per Level of this Skill.
The effects of this Skill will last 20 seconds.

[Ebonfire]
Requirements: Level 3 Warlock, INT 20
School: Ruin
Type: Targeted
Cost: 100 MP
Range: 25 Meters
[Effects]
Engulfs your target's soul in flames, burning away their body over 6 seconds.
Has no effect on Undead, Demons and Golems.

[Your target's soul burns away at their flesh. Target HP -140.]

It was a gamble. Breaking its sword on purpose to lure her in, trying to get rid of those pesky eyes all over her head, pressuring her so much that she focused her whole being on running away - it was all done for this. Its one ace in the hole was that the Fleshmaiden did not know it could use magic. In some ways it was glad it passed on those first two chances. A half-baked Spell would have only revealed its identity as a Caster and ruined any chance of pulling something like this off. That much was made clear by her impressive last-ditch effort to dodge its spell.

[Your target's soul burns away at their flesh. Target HP -140.]

However, unlike Fireball or Shadowbolt, this Spell did not fire out a projectile. The Mimic simply needed to focus on a target that was both within its line of sight and within range. Finishing the chant would then cause it to immediately catch on fire. The Fleshmaiden had absolutely no

chance of pulling off a feat like dodging the chest's eyesight when she was more than ten meters away from it.

And so, its improvised plan to confuse and befuddle the Dungeon Master came to fruition. Its rewards were a terrifying amount of damage being dealt each second and an unceasing torrent of screams. Truly a satisfying result that was almost as tasty as Snack.

[Your target's soul burns away at their flesh. Target HP -140.]

But now wasn't the time to laze around and bask in the afterglow. The Spell was about to expire and the Mimic had to be ready in case that persistent creature actually survived it. It hurriedly picked itself up off the floor and wobbled unsteadily towards the Fleshmaiden that was still clinging to life.

[Your target's soul burns away at their flesh. HP -140.]
[Proficiency level increased. Power Overwhelming is now Level 3. INT +4.]
[Proficiency level increased. Ruin Mastery is now Level 5. INT +2. WIS +1. END +1.]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 16 Warlock! INT +4. MNT +4. END +4.]

But she did not make it. An increase in Job Levels was definite proof that something had died. And since the Mimic was still very much alive, that meant it was unquestionably the winner. All that was left of the former Dungeon Master was a charred pile of meat that was still gripping onto the handle of her mithril dagger.

The Mimic felt relief wash over it. It slumped back to the ground and reverted back to a chest that was battered and splintered all over. There would be no celebratory dance this time, it was way too tired for that sort of excessive celebration. The only thing on its mind was to rest, so it naturally returned to its dormant state.

The room seemed incredibly peaceful after that violent struggle. The Mimic had forgotten how quiet it could get in this dungeon. Its thoughts drifted off towards the way it had lived its short life until this moment.

Close fights like this were nothing new to this monster. It was forced to face off against groups of adventurers multiple times while it was still a resident

of this place. Honestly, that guard patrol fight wasn't even in its top five most dangerous scuffles since it walked away with most of its HP intact.

But all those close calls had one thing in common - the monster was able to overcome them through a combination of luck and its opponents fucking up in some way. It vividly remembered that one Caster-type adventurer. It was busy fighting with his friend and suffered numerous wounds before it drove a sword through his chest. The Caster panicked and fumbled his Spell, causing it to backfire and explode in his hands. If that adventurer had succeeded, then the Mimic would have died then and there. The fact all its coin tosses so far came heads-up almost seemed like a miracle.

Indeed, today wasn't the first time it had to fight desperately to survive, but it was the first time it achieved victory completely on its own power. There was no lucky break and its opponent didn't trip up over herself. The Mimic had driven the Fleshmaiden into a corner by using her own habits against her. It had won in a battle of wits, pure and simple. Thinking back on that intense struggle, it felt an odd surge of emotion unlike anything else it had experienced. It wasn't the joy of winning a tough battle nor was it spite for the enemy that wounded it so badly.

No, it felt a very specific feeling. One that gave rise to two words, a phrase it never even knew about until just now. It focused its magical perception on the smoldering remains of that formidable enemy and it gave voice to that emotion.

"Thank you."

It then drifted off into a peaceful slumber, which was just another in a long line of 'firsts' that had happened today.

Chapter Five
Catalyst

Part One

The Mimic woke up violently. It shot out several unrecognizable limbs from its underside that were perhaps intended to be spider legs, but they came out so malformed and unrefined that they looked closer to oversized noodles. They flailed and thrashed around for a few seconds before managing to tip the chest over and make it fall on its backside with a thud. The sudden impact with the ground seemed to snap the monster out of its haze and allow it to finally remember where it was and what it was doing there.

The root cause of its distress was that it had never experienced sleeping before. This sensation of waking up was vastly different from the time it slipped into a three day Rank Up coma. Back then, its mind seemed to wake up before the rest of its body did, which was the opposite of what happened just now. The whole slumbering monster thing was vastly different from the other times it took a break. After all, no matter how tired or hungry it was, its consciousness had never slipped out from under it like that before. It's not like the thought of resting its body was strange, but this was the first time it needed to rest its mind.

Or, to put it in another way, this was the first time it had a mind that needed rest. Up until a few days ago, it was still a simple Lesser Mimic whose main concerns were not dying, how tasty things were and where it could get more of the tasty things. But now it was a Greater Mimic, a creature that could form coherent thoughts and had a much higher capacity for learning and understanding. Complicated emotions like gratitude towards an enemy were now also within reach. And that higher-performance cognitive ability demanded maintenance in the form of sleep.

That's not how the Mimic saw it, though. It almost felt cheated, to be honest. Why did it have to suddenly lose consciousness like that? Didn't such a thing make it incredibly vulnerable? If it knew about this sooner, it would have not allowed itself to sleep in the first place. Or at the very least it would have wanted to have its familiar around to guard it.

Eventually it would find out that it was actually quite a light sleeper and would wake up the instant it detected something within the range of its magical perception or felt an odd vibration through the ground it was

‘sitting’ on. It was just that right now, it had no idea about any of that. Such things were not present in this deathly silent chamber.

“Ack!” it exclaimed. It picked itself up off the floor and stood up. Or at least, as close to ‘standing up’ as a spider-chest could get. It quickly scanned the room and confirmed three points of interest. The dungeon core was still there, the former Fleshmaiden was still dead and the entrance was no longer sealed shut. Having made sure its safety was not in immediate danger, it allowed itself to relax a little. Only a little though, it still had things it had to do.

First of all, it leaped up in the air and did a backflip, then performed a few stretches and trial shapeshifts to make extra sure everything was in working order, which seemed to be the case. Its body actually felt strangely refreshed and full of energy. If these were the after-effects of a good night’s rest, then perhaps sleep wasn’t all bad. Well, it was still only day two in its life as a Greater Mimic. It would need more time to get used to its new species.

There was still the matter of the Fleshmaiden’s corpse, though. It went over to it and tried to use Cadaver Absorption, but the Skill failed to activate. Even if she did have a heart and brain, they would have been completely destroyed by the Ebonfire Spell. Her body was in such a horrible state that the Mimic didn’t even want to eat it the old-fashioned way. Which was a shame considering that the few pieces it bit off her during the fight weren’t half bad. Perhaps a bit juicier than it preferred, but tasty all the same.

It felt better about it when it remembered to take her other mithril dagger, though. That one clean stab she got on the inside of its mouth did a whopping 130 damage to its HP. It was therefore looking forward to seeing if these new weapons would serve it well. These weapons also had the added benefit of being shiny. Mithril was technically a precious metal also known as white gold, so the Mimic instinctively felt a certain amount of satisfaction when it put both of those things in its Storage.

Next it checked its Status. It remembered it had managed to become a Level 16 Warlock before drifting off to sleep, meaning it could unlock one additional Skill.

[Skill List: Warlock]

Unlocked Skills: Summon Familiar, Power Overwhelming

Available Skills: Blood Magic, Crystallize Magic, Demonology
You can unlock 1 additional Restricted Skill from this Job.

Once again its options seemed oddly limited. At Level 5 it could only pick Summon Familiar. At Level 10 it had a bare-bones choice between Power Overwhelming and Blood Magic. It chose the former because it seemed like the more useful one, even if it turned out to have bad compatibility with Stealth and Assassination. Not to mention the other Skill looked more than a little dubious.

[Blood Magic]
The Warlock offers up his own life force to power his magic.
Requirements: Level 10 Warlock, END 60
Type: Toggled (OFF)
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Ruin and Domination Spells will consume HP instead of MP.
Reduces the HP Cost of Ruin and Domination Spells by 3% per Level of this Skill.

It was a Skill that demanded the Mimic willingly sacrifice its HP to use magic. There was no way the monster would agree to something like that, though. Preserving MP was important, but keeping HP above 0 was its top priority. It may have been a different story if it had the power of regeneration like that Fleshmaiden or maybe the healing magic that adventurers were seen using, but such things were beyond its reach for the moment. It might reconsider its choice if it gained some method of instantly recovering its HP.

And then realization hit it like a whale crashing into a rowboat.

Potions. The magical red liquid that would miraculously close wounds and restore HP. Those three vials it crunched yesterday would have been incredibly helpful in the fight it just went through. It finally understood why those humans kept the tasty thing bottled up rather than drink it immediately. Healing potions were not food, they were medicine. Okay, it didn't use the word 'medicine,' exactly. That much was still a foreign concept, but at least it recognized them as 'tasty thing that makes the pain go away.' Close enough, right?

Regret was not tasty. It had wasted more than a few of those life-saving vials during its time, completely oblivious to the fact that it could save them for later. But now that it was aware of it, it made up its mind to keep a ready stock of them inside its Storage. The importance of preparation was yet another lesson it had picked up during this dungeon crawl, among other things. It truly felt a smidgen of gratitude towards the Fleshmaiden for showing it just how conceited it had become.

Ah, but it was getting side-tracked. It still had two new Skills to check up on!

[Crystallize Magic]
Binds magic Spells to a more permanent form, allowing it to be stored for later use
Requirements: Level 15 Caster Job, INT 90, WIS 60
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 0 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
The next Area Effect Spell will have its MP Cost increased by 25%.
The next Area Effect Spell will be stored temporarily inside a conjured Spell Crystal.
Shattering a Spell Crystal will unleash the stored Area Effect Spell.
Spell Crystals will last up to 6 minutes per Level of this Skill before disappearing.

Another complicated Skill with a lot of weird restrictions. However, its effects did seem to be worth the trouble. If the Mimic could prepare a bunch of these crystals in advance, it wouldn't need to chant at all. All it had to do was keep them in its Storage and then throw them out at the right moment. However, that seemed limited to only Area Effect Spells, of which it currently only had two.

[Mass Panic]
Requirements: Level 5 Warlock, INT 15, MNT 15
School: Domination
Type: Area Effect
Cost: 50 MP
Range: 5 Meters

[Effects]
Sends all living things in the immediate area into a magically-induced panic attack.
Has no effect on Undead, Demons and Golems.

Mass Panic had the problem that it only affected the area around the caster. If the enemy was already that close, then there was a good chance they would be able to interrupt the chant. But if that was sealed in a Spell Crystal, it would eliminate that possibility. It should even be possible to throw the crystal and drastically increase the range. The usability of this Spell would go way up!

[Dark Explosion]
Requirements: Level 13 Warlock, INT 60, MNT 40
School: Ruin
Type: Area Effect
Cost: 120 MP
Range: 25 Meters
[Effects]
Causes a violent shock wave of darkness at a target area.
The force of the Spell will forcefully repel all matter within 3 meters of the target area.
Grows in power in dark places or at night, gaining up to 50% additional force depending on the environment.

Dark Explosion on the other hand had a rather lengthy chant that took three or four seconds to complete, significantly longer than something like Ebonfire or Shadowbolt. Therefore, preparing the Spell in advance would allow the Mimic to throw it out instantly at the opportune moment! A strategy that fit in perfectly with its dirty fighting. Would the other Skill be able to compete with that?

[Demonology]
The study of demons and demonic rituals.
Requirements: Level 15 Warlock, Level 3 Summon Familiar, WIS 60, MNT 60
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self

[Effects]
Increases the Cost of Summon Familiar by 2% per Level of this Skill.
Allows the Warlock to contract and summon 1 additional demon through the Summon Familiar Skill at Level 1 of this Skill.
Allows the Warlock to contract and summon 1 additional demon through the Summon Familiar Skill at Level 7 of this Skill.

That did indeed seem to be the case. The succubus had proved to be extremely useful when it came to infiltration and deception. Her magic was nothing to scoff at either, but she was sorely lacking when it came to close quarters combat. Therefore, if the Mimic had another demon under its command to fill that gap, they would be able to fight far more efficiently as a group. It even had the added boon of allowing it to use more MP during the summoning, meaning its demons would grow steadily more powerful.

There is strength in numbers. This was the simple truth the chest had gleaned from its fights against adventurers. And it had experienced it first hand. It was highly likely that the chest would have perished in the encounter with the Fleshmaiden if Xera wasn't there. It would be a long time before the Skill reached Level 7, but sometimes the wait made the meal all the more tasty.

Ah, but Crystallize Magic looked tasty as well. But which one was more delicious? Telling just by looking really wasn't possible, after all. The greedy Mimic wanted both, and that could technically happen once its Warlock Job reached Level 20, but it still had to choose the one it wanted first. This really seemed like a tough decision. Magical grenades or another capable minion? If only there was someone around to give the stumped chest a fresh perspective.

Oh.

"Greetings, Master," said Xera some ten seconds and a flash of light later. This was immediately followed by "Ughh! What the fuck!"

The dumbfounded succubus grimaced fiercely as she took in the surrounding scenery. The aftermath of two shapeshifters going at each other with bladed weapons was on par with a natural disaster! Dried up blood and dismembered body parts littered the floor, including an out-of-place, half-molten head resting awkwardly in a puddle of something.

The nearby pile of charred meat that used to be the Fleshmaiden was the biggest problem. Not the way it looked, although that was pretty disgusting in and of itself, but rather the horrible stench it gave off. That indescribable scent of burnt flesh seemed to permeate the entire room.

“What in the hell happened here?” she asked with a hand over her mouth and nose. It wasn’t helping though.

“I won,” said the Mimic with a hint of pride.

“Yes, I can see that! I mean what’s with this horrible smell?”

“What smell?”

“...”

Right, treasure chests didn’t have noses. The succubus actually envied that lucky bastard of a box right now. Ah, technically speaking, she didn’t really need hers, either. So she took a page out of her master’s book and shapeshifted it shut. Even if the horrible stench didn’t technically cause her any harm, unpleasant things were still unpleasant.

“Is the smell tasty?” probed the Mimic.

“No, Master. It’s extremely disgusting. I would not recommend trying it.”

If it did, it would undoubtedly get pissed off. Which meant snack time until it calmed down. And Xera did not want any more of that. She didn’t, okay?

“Oh. Okay,” it responded dejectedly. Higher mental functions or not, it still felt disappointed when the verdict of this new thing was ‘not tasty.’

The succubus walked over to the former Dungeon Master and gave it a curious look. This was the first time she had seen something burned up so thoroughly before. And yet it still seemed to be… leaking.

“Master, what did you do to this thing?”

“I hit her with a big Spell.”

Xera’s eyes widened in shock. A single Spell? Given how quickly she moved and how she shrugged off having half her torso bitten off, Xera was convinced she must have been at least Level 40. Not to mention she was obviously experienced at fighting Casters. Then again, nobody was really prepared for the ridiculous things this box did. It probably used some underhanded trick to seize a weakness.

She chuckled. What she was most surprised about wasn't the power it displayed, but the fact it actually remembered to use it. It seemed like the succubus would have to give her master some credit. Just a little, though.

"Alright then, what do you want from me?" she asked in a business-like tone. It was highly unlikely this chest summoned her for no reason.

"Do you know the Demonology Skill?" it asked.

"Umm..."

The succubus furrowed her brows and dug through her memory, but had trouble recalling anything about that particular Skill. That was to be expected since her knowledge regarding the Warlock Job was quite superficial. She wasn't one herself, after all - she merely worked with them. Often against them, actually.

That was pretty much her expected behavior, though. Relationships between a Warlock and its familiar were always founded on distrust and deception. And with her being a succubus that thrived on such things, it meant she was trusted even less. Nobody in their right mind would want to listen to her opinions, lest they fall for her schemes and ended up as a dried up corpse in a ditch somewhere.

She really didn't need to go that far, though. The Warlocks she managed to turn the tables on were complete idiots who practically killed themselves. There was that one guy who stuck his penis in her mouth and gave her some vague command like 'Make me cum buckets.' How did he not realize that was an open invitation for her to suck the very life out of his dick?

But her current master was radically different from all of her previous ones. Well, that was to be expected considering it was a monster with no sex drive. It treated her like dirt, constantly ate her flesh and even tortured her psychologically with its inane attitude and brazen shapeshifting habits. And yet, it understood and even encouraged her urges to devour the lives of mortal men. Sure, it was idiotic, merciless and completely devoid of common sense, but this was still the best working relationship Xera had ever had with another person. Well, another mortal at any rate.

Deliberately or not, that chest still did wonders to alleviate her boredom. That was ultimately the most important thing. It had only been a week or so

since their contract began, yet she found herself incredibly curious as to how far it would be able to go and what sort of things it would accomplish.

“No, Master. I am not familiar with this Skill,” she answered after putting her thoughts in order.

“What about Crystallize Magic?”

“I don’t know that one either.”

The Mimic proceeded to explain both Skills and how it wasn’t sure which one to pick. Would it go for the nasty crystal surprise or opt for the extra pair of hands to help out in fights? It seems that it had been obsessing over this decision for quite a while. However, Xera almost immediately pointed out something that her master didn’t consider.

“You do realize what would happen if you dropped one of those crystals, right?”

The chesty Warlock thought back on the first time it used Dark Explosion. The Spell had been aimed at a group of seven goblins foraging for food in the forest. Two of them were right at the center of the detonation. They became red mist. Three of the others were closer to the edge of the Spell’s area of effect and were thrown into the air like ragdolls. They crashed into trees and rocks at high speeds, dying instantly from the impact. The last two were outside the blast zone, but still suffered heavy damage from fragmented stones and bones sent flying by the explosion.

Having recalled that rather vivid memory, the Mimic imagined what would happen if it fumbled a Dark Explosion sealed inside a Spell Crystal.

“...”

[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 1. WIS +2. MNT +2.]

Sometimes it really was best to bounce ideas off other people.

Part Two

Establishing a contract with a demon was generally believed to be a complicated ritual that involves a number of seemingly random ingredients and materials. There were indeed such practices that may be performed, such as the Ritual of Zul'Goroth. That particular ceremony involved butterflies, blood, a fox, a severed head, some cheese and skipping rope with some entrails. The product of this ritual would be the creation of a perfectly ordinary sweetroll that was actually kind of stale. Not the best use of a severed head if a certain Mimic had anything to say about that.

The Demonology Skill flooded the animate chest's mind with the knowledge of several dubiously useful rituals like that. But none of those were actually related to establishing a contract with a demonic entity and calling them forth to this world. No, that bit was actually much more straightforward. All the Warlock had to do to get the ball rolling was reach out into the Beyond, a process that boiled down to concentrating a bit and then 'thinking aloud' a series of numbers.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Beep ... Beep ... Beep ... Bee-

Click

"Hello," spoke a voice directly into its mind. It sounded rough and gritty, like someone had been eating gravel for breakfast every day for two decades.

"You have reached Demons 'R' Us," it continued, "my name is Carl and I'll be your liaison for today."

"Hey Carl," responded the Mimic. It seemed it had managed to connect to the same agent it got the first time.

"Ohhh! If it isn't that amusing little box?! How've you been, buddy?"

"Pretty good. Ate some people. Gained some Levels."

"Hey, that's super. So, what can I do for you today?"

"I got a new Skill that said I can get another contract."

“Alright, just a second. **Taptaptaptap taptaptaptaptap tap taptaptap** Okay, can you forward your Status to me? You DO remember how to do that, right?”

Carl had spent nearly three hours teaching the Mimic how to send its Status over a telepathic link the first time around. It messed up several times and even somehow forwarded it to Carl’s boss by mistake before it could get it just right. Carl caught more than a little flak over that particular event.

“Yes, sending it now,” it replied.

“Okay. I’ve received it. Oh, you got a Rank Up, grats! Ah, Demonology is it? Hold, please.”

There were some more half-tapping half-clacking noises before Carl continued, “Good news, my square friend. Your request for additional demonic support has been approved! Now then, what species are you looking to form a covenant with?”

“Fiend.”

Taptaptaptaptap tap

“Male or female?”

“There’s a difference?”

“Males are generally more intelligent while females are more ferocious.”

“Then female.”

Taptap taptaptaptaptaptap tap

“A tall one or a short one?”

“Tall.”

Tap tap tap

“Do you prefer big or small chests?”

“Big,” answered the Mimic immediately. How was this even a question? Bigger treasure chests had more shiny things inside them and were therefore better without a doubt.

“I know, right? Ah, sorry for asking again, company policy.”

“No problem.”

The question did strike it as a little out of place at first, but it didn't worry too much about it. Carl himself said it didn't affect the demon's performance in any way and was mostly a formality of establishing the contract. He asked it some more questions followed by some more weird mechanical noises. A few minutes later, they got to the last one.

"Any additional requests?"

Last time, the Mimic had said it wanted something that was good at hiding and got a succubus specialized in infiltration and covering her tracks through dream manipulation. That wasn't quite what it had in mind, but it still worked out so it had no complaints. This time was even simpler - it just needed a vanguard that could take hits in its place. And pretty much any fiend fit that bill. Still, having one with more than a single use would be good.

"It doesn't matter, as long as it's handy."

"Understood. **Tap taptaptaptap taptaptap taptap** Alright, now all we need to do is wait for- Oh, never mind! Your application got an instant reply! Just gimme a sec here… **Taptaptaptap** There, done! Your new familiar is all set up and ready to be summoned. Will that be all for today?"

"Yes."

"Then would you like to fill out a survey to-"

"No."

"Understood. Thank you again for contacting Demons 'R' Us. We hope to hear from you again."

Click

Well, that was over and done with. It immediately proceeded with the summoning, which caught the attention of Xera. She stopped staring absentmindedly at the dungeon core and went over to see her new co-contractor. Part of her was really looking forward to having someone else be the Snack for once.

Ten seconds and 300 MP later, a new demon appeared in the dungeon. A giant form about two hundred and fifty centimeters in height - almost a full meter taller than Xera - loomed over them. Counting the slightly curved

horns that were pointing straight up, it was closer to two hundred and seventy centimeters tall.

The summoned female fiend had bright green hair that went past her shoulders. It was unruly, thick and voluminous, giving her a rather wild appearance. A pair of long, elf-like ears sprouted out from beneath it. Her skin was a bright, eye-catching red that was impossible to conceal. Her eyes were bright green, similar to the hair. They gave off a keen glare that looked for the weakness in others. Her face as a whole didn't look half-bad. Humans would honestly consider her to be cute or pretty if she stopped scowling and baring her pointed teeth at her surroundings.

Below her chin was a choker with a metal plate in front that seemed to protect her neck. Immediately below that were her breasts. Unlike Xera, they appeared to be more modestly proportioned when compared to the rest of her. Their actual size, however, easily triumphed over the succubus due to the difference in height. They were bound together tightly by a white sports-bra-like chest piece that left her clearly defined abs and well-muscled lower-back exposed.

An extremely tight pair of very short shorts fit snugly around her lower end. The highly muscular and disproportionately massive thighs that were nearly as thick as her relatively narrow waist. They strained against the white hotpants, threatening to rip them apart at any moment. Her legs beneath the knees were encased in metal plate greaves. The outside of her left thigh was covered by interlinking metal plates that went all the way up to her waist, leaving the inner thigh and her entire right upper leg exposed to the air.

Her arms, like the rest of her, had a significant amount of muscle that was clearly visible along her bare shoulders and upper arms. Her biceps didn't bulge out that much, but looked to be quite dense all the same.

Heavy-looking metal gauntlets were strapped to her forearms, however these didn't seem like armor. Her palms, fingers and the underside of her forearms were left unarmored, for one thing. Actually, given the way the gauntlets naturally covered the knuckles and the back of her hands in metal plates, they were probably intended to be weapons that enhanced punching attacks. They also looked like they'd add a significant amount of weight to each strike. Also, there were four them. An extra pair of shoulders grew out from behind the primary ones to give her a total of four powerful arms.

Well, she was definitely ‘handy,’ though perhaps not quite in the way the Mimic meant. It made a mental note to be as unambiguous as possible the next time it spoke to anyone from Demons ‘R’ Us.

As for the newly summoned fiend, she seemed to do a few flexes and twists to get used to her physical body while looking around the room. Her line of sight stopped on Xera, who was standing off to her left.

“Huh? You’re my new master?” she asked with a dumb look on her face.

“No. Demons can’t summon other demons, you dimwit,” replied the succubus as she pointed at the other demon’s feet. “Your master is down there.”

The confused tower of muscle looked down to see a simple wooden treasure chest. The Mimic was currently still busy appraising his new minion. She seemed to be slightly more armored on her left side than on her right, which was a bit odd. The various metal plates strapped to her body appeared to be made from something resembling steel, but the strange red sheen they gave off meant it was anything but. Her horns seemed to also be made of that stuff. Her top and bottom garments, on the other hand, were made of a flexible white fabric that hugged around her womanly bits snugly without obscuring movement.

Still failing to comprehend, the newly summoned fiend squatted down to get a closer look. It looked exactly like an unassuming wooden treasure chest no matter how much she studied it.

“This thing?” she asked Xera while pointing curiously at it with her two right hands. “How’s a box supposed to be my master? Or anyone’s for that matter?”

“Lean in closer,” came the first command.

“Ugeh! It really is the box!”

That order definitely came from the thing in front of her. It would seem that the succubus in the room wasn’t just fucking with her for shits and giggles like she thought.

“I said lean in closer!” it demanded.

The fiend was still dumbstruck, but did as ordered. It was part of the contract she just agreed to, so she put her face even closer to the treasure chest

without much thought. She was now close enough to it that she could lick it if she stretched out her tongue.

And then the Mimic jumped at her and bit her across the face. Its powerful teeth sank into her skull, but failed to crush it.

“Uraah!” she screamed, more in surprise than pain. The sudden shock of having a vicious chest clamp onto her face made her stumble backwards from her squatting position and fall on her tight rump.

“What the fuck! Are you trying to eat my face or something?!”

She tried to pull it off her head, but couldn’t put any strength into her arms since that would count as attacking her master directly.

“Yes,” was the immediate reply.

“Why?!”

“The other demon is really tasty. I want to know if you’re any better.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She immediately stopped her struggling and let the Mimic do as it pleased. It nibbled on her face for a while and the fiend just sat cross-legged without uttering a sound. Xera was, understandably, completely baffled at the turn of events. Not the Mimic trying to eat things, that was expected. But a demon willingly accepting that sort of treatment was strange, to say the least.

Eventually the Mimic had enough and detached from the red woman, landing deftly on its spider legs. It had gone for her face because her other limbs were all armored up and didn’t seem like they would break under its jaws. The skull was also much thicker and tougher than it seemed, which was only to be expected of a species that thrived on close quarters combat.

“So,” said the fiend while black blood streamed down her forehead, “how was I?”

The Mimic replied by sticking out its tongue and making a ‘Bleh!’ sound. “Not tasty at all! Snack is much tastier!”

“Oh, come on! I can be tasty, too!”

“Impossible.”

Xera always tasted the same no matter how many times it ate her, so it was unlikely this new demon would just change suddenly.

“Grrr!”

A fact that seemed to somehow tick her off.

“What, you want to be eaten alive?!” retorted the succubus, wide-eyed.

“No! I mean, not particularly! I just hate losing! Especially to a- wait, Snack?!”

“Ah, that would be my… job description,” said the junk food in question, albeit a bit hesitantly.

“Pfu! Puhahahahaha!” The fiend broke out into mocking laughter. “You’re a snack! Hahahaha! To think one of you stuck-up whores would end up as nothing but some box’s afternoon meal! Ohohahahaha!”

She kept rolling around on the ground, clutching her stomach and unable to hide her enjoyment of her compatriot’s suffering. Well, all demons did that, but this situation was extra tasty for her. After all, fiends and succubi never got along with one another. This was hardly a surprise considering the two species of demon were pretty much polar opposites of one another.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up while you can.”

Xera casually dismissed the other demon’s mockery with a wave of her hand. This much humiliation was nothing compared to what that Mimic had put her through. Also, she was secretly looking forward to watching this newcomer go through the same level of abuse.

As for the chest in question, it had already lost interest in their shenanigans and was moving towards the whole reason it came to this dungeon in the first place - the dungeon core. With its previous owner dealt with, the core’s automatic defense system no longer activated and anyone could approach it. And when the Mimic got within a meter of the floating red orb, it suddenly got an offer.

[The Litigar Dungeon Complex has recognized you as its rightful ruler.]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

The two demons in the room seemed to notice it was doing something and stopped their bickering so they could see what happened. Xera had no idea why her master wanted to come here, but she had a pretty good guess. The newcomer had no idea as to much of anything right now, so her curiosity was on an entirely different level.

And then the Mimic took out a sword and slashed at the dungeon core. The steel blade was knocked backwards the instant it made contact with the crystal, as if someone had forcefully deflected it with a shield.

[Your attack has been repelled.]

“Huck!” it cursed out loud.

It tried once again, this time by putting as much strength and weight into it as it could. The over-used and under-maintained weapon was repelled with even greater force when it struck the red crystal, causing the blade to break off at the hilt and fly off into the air. It then promptly sheathed itself inside Xera’s torso, right between the breasts.

“Yeeeow!” she screamed. It stung like a bitch, but it was still more tolerable than snack time. “What the heck are you doing?!” she chided her master. “You can’t break a dungeon core with a shitty weapon like that!”

“Oh,” replied the Mimic. Then how about a different weapon? Ah, but the mithril daggers might break as well against that indestructible ball. That wouldn’t be tasty at all.

“You there,” it called out to the red fiend. “Name?”

“Fufufufu… You did well to ask me that, mortal!” She took a haughty pose with her arms crossed and started monologuing while looking smug for some reason. “Know that this one’s name will one day be known throughout the lands as-”

“Your name is now Arms,” it interrupted.

It remembered it could just check her Status rather than asking directly. Her name was incredibly long and difficult to say, so it just went with a nickname. It could have just as easily have shortened it to ‘Kora,’ but that would mean acknowledging her as a ‘sentient being’ rather than the ‘thing’ she truly was.

“Go break the shiny thing,” it ordered.

She seemed to have a good bit of STR and her species looked to have considerably more muscle mass than Mimics, so it was as good a time as any to see just how powerful she really was. The demon herself seemed to be looking forward to finding that out as well, as she had completely forgotten her self-introduction was cut short and was already getting oddly psyched up.

“Oh! I can smash it?”

“Yes. Smash it.”

“Alright!”

Fiends thrived on violence and combat, and loved smashing things in general. Therefore, Kora felt overjoyed when her first real order was to smash a thing. She walked over to the comparatively tiny dungeon core and lowered her stance to the extreme. The Mimic quietly walked away from her since it had a sneaking suspicion of what would happen next.

Kora turned to her side and started winding up. The muscles on her right arms and shoulders bulged out even more. She then hurled them forward while spinning on her heel, putting all her body weight behind the blow. Her metal gauntlets made a duo of heavy-sounding hits on the core, but were bounced backwards all the same. The sudden change in direction would undoubtedly have snapped her arms in half if those metal plates didn’t absorb much of that counter-impact.

“Gah!” shouted the fiend in frustration. It seemed her power wasn’t enough to bypass whatever defense that thing had.

Not that she cared.

Alright, she did care.

She cared immensely, actually.

“You stupid ball!” she shouted. “Don’t think you can make a fool of me! Ora!”

She then took another swing at it with one of her right arms.

[Your attack has been repelled.]

“Orrra!” and then a follow up strike with one of the lefts.

[Your attack has been repelled.]

“Ora! Ora! Ora!” she kept calling out with each failed swing while picking up the pace. If a single big hit wouldn't do, then how about five hundred smaller hits?

“ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA ORA!”

Her hands became a blur as she unleashed a torrent of punches on that infuriating crystal orb. All of them failed to do a single point of damage. She grew more and more frustrated until she did a final attack with a spinning roundhouse kick while screaming “HHOOORRRRRAAAA!”

Her armored foot made an almost echoing thud when she struck the core.

This attack didn’t get repelled.

It didn’t break the core either. What happened was that the glowing crystal ball was dislodged from its magically affixed position and was sent flying towards the edge of the room as if it were a kickball. The core hit the stone brick wall hard enough to shake the entire room, then fell to the ground with a clear gong-like sound.

“Take that!” screamed Kora after it. “Piece of shit ball! Showed you who’s boss, didn’t I?!”

“It’s still perfectly whole, though,” pointed out Xera. “You obviously can’t break a dungeon core with just brute strength. Only moronic muscle-heads and retarded boxes would keep trying despite knowing that.”

“... Showed that ball who’s boss!” insisted her red-skinned co-contractor while completely ignoring the succubus’s snide attitude.

The Mimic, on the other hand, walked closer to the still glowing core. It seemed that Snack was right and cracking this thing open was beyond its means. It really wanted to get its revenge on this place, so leaving without breaking the core seemed like it would leave a bad taste in its mouth. Then again, it did kill the Dungeon Master. That was rather satisfying on its own, so it decided to consider its mission fulfilled.

On second thought, not breaking the core might be a good thing.

“Arms. Pick it up and bring it outside.”

“‘Kay!” she replied in high spirits.

Fiends hated being used for menial labor, but Kora was pretty happy right now. How could she not be? It had been a really long time since she'd last been to the physical realm and then she was told to smash a thing almost immediately. Being able to move around so much with an actual body felt amazing.

"Master, why are you telling her to bring that thing along?" asked Xera, dumbfounded.

"I want the shiny thing."

[General Information]
Koralenteprix Khusuuszun Caonthioxxaa
Fiend (Pit), Female, 312 years old
Level 12.55 Fiend
Level 8.88 Berserker
615/615 HP (+1.0/sec)
67/67 MP (+0.1/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 100, DEX 42, AGI 58, END 100, INT 16, WIS 16, MNT 84

[Fiend Skills]
Demonic Armaments - Lvl 4.64
Second Wind - Lvl 3.51
[Berserker Skills]
Bloodlust - Lvl 4.64
[Other Skills]
Idiotic Strength - Lvl 3.04
Brawling Mastery - Lvl 4.00

Part Three

The Mimic and its two familiars were finally going to depart the core chamber. They had spent a bit too long in there and the monster had gotten hungry. There were a few left over wolf corpses in Storage, but those were not enough to completely satiate it. It wanted to go before the debilitating starvation conditions started to set in. They still had that map they looted earlier, so they wouldn't get lost on their way out, at least.

Next would be the matter of the one meter wide crystalline dungeon core. The Mimic wanted to bring the shiny thing along, but it wouldn't fit in its Storage. The swirling portal to the monster's pocket dimension could only expand to about sixty centimeters in diameter, which was considerably better than the ten centimeter hole it was at Level 1. It was still far from enough though.

And so the solution would be for Kora to carry it. The core weighed in at about eighty kilograms, which, all things considered, was relatively light. Not that the female fiend had any trouble handling that sort of weight. She hoisted it up with one hand and put it on her shoulder, cradling it between her head and forearm. Even its awkward size was no problem for someone of her stature. If anything, the way she casually handled it would make one think it was just a fancy beach ball rather than the crystallized heart of a dungeon.

"Okay," said the Mimic after confirming there was nothing of value left in the desolate room. "We're leaving!"

It headed off towards the chamber's exit with its familiars leading the way.

"Master, why are walking?" asked Xera with a bit of annoyance. "Let's just use Portal Keys to get out!"

"Portal Key? What's that? Is it tasty?" came the rather predictable response from the chest.

"Can I smash it?" chimed in the fiend with a sharp glint in her eye.

"Haah," sighed the succubus.

She began educating the two airheads about the common albeit slightly expensive items known as Portal Keys. Crushing one of these would teleport

an adventurer to the safety of the dungeon's Waystone. It was convenient, but came with a few limitations. The user had to stand still when using it, it could only bring out one person at a time due to weight restrictions and the item was lost after a single use and had absolutely no function outside of a dungeon with a Waystone. Not observing any of these rules meant the item would simply fail to activate properly.

"Do we have something like that?" asked the Mimic once the explanation was over.

"We do!" she demanded. "Those white stones we looted earlier, they're still in your Storage, right?"

"Oh, the dusty things!" exclaimed the Mimic. It had seen a few adventurers using the item, but didn't quite understand its effects. That was, not until Xera explained them just now. To its infantile mind it just seemed that the other party disappeared. It didn't want to disappear, so it took extra care to avoid accidentally eating those stones until now. There was just one problem, though.

"Can we bring the shiny along with us?"

"... Probably not," said Xera while hanging her head. The very weight restrictions she mentioned earlier would not allow for the extra-heavy dungeon core to be transported.

"Then we walk. Arms, can you fight while holding the shiny?"

"Sure. I still got three spare hands you know."

She gave them a wave to prove her point. Satisfied, the Mimic ordered them all to make for the exit. They proceeded down the long, spiraling corridor at a brisk pace. The spider-chest had to skitter along faster than normal to keep up with Kora's wide stride. Xera gave up on walking altogether and just glided along behind them on her wings with her staff floating idly by her side. Overall, it was almost a pleasant walk. If only it wasn't for that one, nagging thing disturbing the Mimic every now and then.

[The Litigar Dungeon Complex has recognized you as its rightful ruler.]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

This offer kept reappearing no matter how many times it declined. It had been coming up every five or so seconds ever since Kora managed to dislodge it from its spot earlier. However, Mimics were ultimately creatures of patience. This particular individual was pretty much a specialist at ignoring others, to boot. It would take a lot more than some nagging windows to annoy it into submission.

[Just pick **[Yes]** already! Please?! I'm begging you here!]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

A weird one popped up by the time they passed the 'No Entry' point on the map and got back into the dungeon proper. The Mimic didn't even pay attention to the stubborn pop up at this point and immediately chose 'No.'

[Okay, I get it! You don't wanna be a Dungeon Master. In that case, just leave the core behind, already! It's not like it'll be of any use to you, anyway!]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

It seemed that there was some sort of consciousness inside this dungeon and it was aware of what was going on. Its pleas and attempts to make the monster see reason were quite futile. After all, the selfish box already decided it wanted the shiny. Therefore, it would keep the shiny.

[Do you have any idea how long it'll take to grow a new one?! Look, I promise I'll make it worth your while if you listen to me and put it down!]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

This attempt at bribery might have actually worked if it wasn't worded poorly. If the Mimic had been offered 'many shiny things' it would have undoubtedly paid attention, perhaps even accepted the deal on the spot. However, ambiguous phrases like 'worth your while' went squarely over its metaphorical head and were summarily ignored. It was a crucial blunder. After all, success or failure in negotiations hinged almost entirely on how well one understood their opponent. Therefore, this entity, which did not

know a single thing about the monster's thought processes, had no chance of persuading it with words.

[Listen here, buddy! You already killed the Dungeon Master! If you think I'll let you just walk away with that core then you've got another think coming!]

[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]

[Yes]

[No]

Whoever or whatever was trying to communicate with the Mimic seemed to be getting rather angry. And perhaps a tiny bit desperate if they gave up on diplomacy and resorted to vague threats. The arachno-chest still ignored them with all its might, though. Even trying to contact the other two proved to be completely fruitless.

That was because Xera and Kora were already bound to the walking chest. There was no way they could be offered a new soul-binding contract while their current one was still in effect. They were therefore completely oblivious to the silent struggle going on inside their master's mind.

However, it would seem that it would not go on for much longer.

[Fine! I didn't want to do this, but you forced my hand! Don't say you weren't warned!]

[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]

[Yes]

[No]

The dull red glow that the core gave off until then suddenly intensified, bathing the surroundings in a bright red light. It started flashing this light on and off with a steady rhythm, almost like an alarm.

Because that's exactly what it was.

"Um, Master?" said Xera with a rather accusatory tone. "What did you do to the core?"

"Nothing? Arms is the one holding it."

It shamelessly deflected the blame. Not that it understood how this was any of its fault, though.

"Hey, don't look at me! I'm just holding onto it like I was ordered and then it started flashing all on its own!"

“Wait, do you hear that?”

There was a sudden howling and screaming coming in from the passage in front of them. And judging from the increasing volume, it was headed right for the three core thieves.

An extra large group of undead - about thirty skeletons, seven ghouls and a dozen or so ghosts poured out of the next corner and dashed madly towards them.

“Arms, smash them up. Snack, support from the back.”

The Mimic calmly gave out orders. It saw no reason to worry. True, the number of enemies was nothing to sneeze at, but it had already faced similar numbers on the way in. Xera by herself was able to take out most of them with her Inferno Spell and what few were left became food for the Mimic’s combat Skills. So now that the two of them had Kora to take point, this fodder stood absolutely no chance of winning.

“Oh yeah! Now this is what I’m talking about!”

The fiend in question seemed to really be looking forward to getting her hands dirty, so much so that she ran out to meet their charge while sporting a wide toothy grin. She smashed into the Skeleton Soldiers at the front with a wide sweeping kick that sent them flying and crashing into the stone wall. Weakness to blunt force trauma was a characteristic trait of skeletons, so most of those monsters shattered into pieces and instantly lost their unlife. Their ‘comrades’ didn’t care though, they just attacked their target. As expected of the mindless undead.

The rusty blades of the other Skeleton Soldiers and the filthy claws of the zombie-like ghouls struck at her. A good number were deflected by the armor on her arms and legs, but over half of the attacks sunk into her flesh.

[You have suffered a shallow wound. HP -19.]
[You have suffered a shallow wound. HP -22.]
[You have been afflicted with a disease. Max HP reduced by 50.]
[You have suffered a shallow wound. HP -13.]
[You have suffered a deep cut. HP -38.]
[You have been poisoned. HP -9.]
[Your movements have been dulled by the poison.]

[You have suffered a shallow wound. HP -23.]
[You have suffered a shallow wound. HP -18.]

Over 100 HP was lost in the blink of an eye. She didn't just sit there and take it, though. Metal-clad punches rained down on the undead like hail while she yelled out 'ora ora' over and over. The storm of heavy blows pounded them into the ground until they were naught but dust and splinters. Well, the skeletons were anyway. The ghouls became more of a bloody smear on the floor and walls.

Xera didn't sit idle either. She called forth an Inferno to decimate the undead platoon's backline that consisted of Skeletal Archers, Skeletal Mages and ghosts. They were all wiped out before they could unleash their arrows and magic onto the gigantic red target in front of them. A few well-placed Fireballs picked off any surviving ghosts.

And while the demon girls were busy clearing the way, their master just sort of stood back and kept an eye on things. Well, it didn't see a need to interfere. Its magic would be as ineffective as ever and slicing up undead seemed to make its swords deteriorate much quicker than when it used them on people or animals. It needed to take better care of them until it could learn to maintain them properly. Not to mention it was down to its last six weapons. Four of them - two swords and two mithril daggers - were picked up in this dungeon. The remaining two blades - a worn-out sword and that shiny enchanted knife - were leftovers from its newbie-hunting days.

[Proficiency level increased. Summon Familiar is now Level 5. INT +2. WIS +1. MNT +1.]
[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 2. WIS +2. MNT +2.]

So instead of dulling its weapons needlessly, it simply enjoyed the sweet taste of its Skills going up in Level without it actually needing to do anything. However, it noticed that Demonology did not go up as quickly as expected. Usually a new Skill would shoot to Level 3 quite rapidly with a huge engagement like this, but it just barely seemed to reach Level 2. If it was going to be this slow, then getting it all the way to Level 7 would take forever.

Maybe it misunderstood the way it should be using this Skill? It's true that simply having the second familiar participate in combat increased

Proficiency, but the gains were way too small. Now that it thought about it, wouldn't Demonology go up quicker if it performed some of those rituals? Well, it would have to wait a while before testing that out. Pretty much all of the ceremonies it knew about needed troll blood. It wasn't even sure what the fuck a troll was!

"Yeeaaaah!" screamed Kora triumphantly while standing ankle-deep in undead bits. "Get smashed, son!"

This odd cheer snapped the Mimic out of its thoughts. It appeared that the two demons were done cleaning up the undead. The one-sided massacre didn't even last a minute! Checking their Statuses, the Mimic confirmed that Kora had lost about 250 HP while Xera had used up about a third of her MP.

"Arms, why is your max HP so low?" it asked after spotting the oddity in her Status. The value in question was currently listed as 374/515. Wasn't it over 600 just a few minutes ago?

"Ah, I'm still poisoned and diseased!"

Oh, right. Abnormal statuses like that were common when fighting the undead at close range.

"You just realized this now…?"

"Snack, shut up and fix her."

"Yes, Master."

The succubus went up to Kora and put a hand on her chiseled abs. Right over the already festering wound left behind by a ghoul.

"Hey!" exclaimed her 'patient.' "What are you doing?"

"Just following orders, dearie."

"And how is poking my wound going to-"

"Purge!"

Plumes of blue flame shot out of all the fiend's open wounds and lit her up like a dangerous Christmas tree. They burned away the toxins in her system while cauterizing her wounds, accompanied by a momentary spike of pain.

[Your body has been purified by the flames. HP -30.]
[You are no longer poisoned.]

[You are no longer diseased.]
[You are no longer bleeding.]

Kora immediately confirmed the feeling in her body was back to normal. Well, she was covered in burns rather than open wounds, but at least she could move properly again.

“Ohh! I can move freely again! Thanks, slut!” she said with a toothy grin.

“I have a name, you nitwit,” retorted Xera while sneering.

“Ahahaha! My bad, my bad. Thanks, Snack.”

“Hohoho, sounds like someone wants their face melted off!”

“Bring it, short stuff! I’ll pummel you so hard only your tits will be left behind!”

“Hah! As if a clumsy oaf like you could ever catch the likes of me!”

Sparks seemed to fly between them as the two glared at each other with murderous intent. Simply because they both had the same master didn’t mean they would get along. It actually seemed to have the opposite effect.

After all, one of them was a succubus that thrived on deception and conspiracy. A creature whose manipulative and cunning nature could incite life-long friends to betray each other. Toppling entire kingdoms from within was entirely possible for the winged seductress. Highly unlikely, but possible nonetheless.

And her co-contractor just happened to be a fiend. A demon that wanted nothing less than to crush her enemies, see them driven before her and hear the lamentations of their women. Or men. Or pet dogs. The mountain of muscle didn’t have any prejudices in that regard and would gladly accept all forms of lamentation, regardless of who or what they came from.

In fact, the only thing in common these two species of demons had was how much they hated each other. Kora and Xera were no different and would undoubtedly be trying to kill one another if their summoning contracts weren’t holding them back. From a magical standpoint, a bound demon was more or less an extension of its master. The two of them were completely unable to physically harm one another without their master’s say-so.

A fact which both of them seemed to realize at the same time.

“Master, requesting permission to kill this bitch!” they screamed out in perfect sync.

The answer they got was a stone thrown to the face that gave them matching black eyes.

“No time for that,” said the Mimic. “More enemies are coming. A lot more.”

“What makes you say that, Master?” asked Xera while rubbing her injured face.

“Look at the shiny.”

Both of them then stared at the still flashing core on Kora’s shoulder. They stared at it but failed to comprehend what was odd about it. Well, other than the obnoxious light, that is.

“What about it?” asked Xera.

“Dunno,” said Kora. “It does seem to feel a little bit heavier, though.”

Unfortunately, neither of the two demons had the means to see what their master was talking about. At least, not with their eyes.

The Mimic’s senses seem to have grown sharper ever since its Rank Up. Its magical perception, in particular, turned out to be quite sensitive. It was at the point where it was capable of reading the thick flow of mana in the dungeon’s air if it focused hard enough. That’s how it knew that the core was currently pulling a huge amount of that mana into itself. The mystical current was so strong that it caused the remains of the undead to dissipate much faster than normal due to the loose magical energy being pulled out of them by force. And all that errant mana was being absorbed by the core.

So what was its purpose in doing so? That was a mystery. However, the side effects of that action were obvious to the former resident of this place.

“It’s pulling the dungeon towards us.”

The monsters in a dungeon would follow the flow of mana without fail.

Part Four

A swarm of twenty or so giant spiders skittered through the tunnels of the Yellow Zone. This part of the dungeon was a cave system not unlike the Green Zone, but its residents were mostly of the arachnid or insectoid persuasion.

[The dungeon core is in danger.]

Such a message was relayed to all monsters that belonged to this place and the oddity in the dungeon's thick mana was guiding them to the object they were programmed to protect. They were certain they were getting close to the source of the distress signal, but less certain about the odd rumbling that could be felt through the walls and floors of this passage. They were approaching a bend in the tunnel when the ones in front spotted the tell-tale red glow of the dungeon core being nearby. And judging from how it increased in intensity with every flash, it was moving towards them.

However, the first thing to pop out of the corner was a wooden box with eight imitation spider legs of its own. They were oddly similar, yet also quite different from the actual spider legs of these monsters. And out of the opened lid streamed three tentacles, each gripping onto a shiny dagger, though one seemed to be different from the other two.

Not that any of them had time to appreciate such things. The arachno-chest bore down on them at great speed, easily surpassing their own, and they immediately recognized it as an invader - an enemy. And the feeling was proved to be pretty much mutual when it started stabbing and slashing at them as the Mimic tore a path right through the middle of them.

[Proficiency level increased. Dagger Mastery is now Level 3. STR +1. DEX +3.]

Six of the monsters were gutted in an instant as the chest kept on running. A few of the simple beasts might have wondered where it was off to in such a hurry, but such idle thoughts were beyond them. They would have gotten their answer almost immediately though.

A giant, crystal ball at least two meters in diameter rolled out from the tunnel ahead of them. It seemed to be so large that it barely fit in this narrow tunnel. There was a loud impact right before it unnaturally changed course. It was

just enough to make it ricochet off the cave wall at speed and roll towards the slightly stunned spiders without losing much speed.

It then rolled over them and mercilessly turned them into paste.

[Congratulations, you are now a level 17 Warlock! INT +2. MNT +2. END +2.]

[You have learned a new Spell: Dark Infusion.]

As for the Mimic, it was in too much of a rush to worry about some spiders. The dungeon core behind it had been rapidly growing in size and weight over the last five or so minutes. If the orb kept increasing in size like this, then it would undoubtedly get stuck in these narrow tunnels and prevent any attempt at bringing it outside the dungeon. Which, incidentally, was exactly what the greedy chest was trying to do.

It was a simple solution, really. Since the core fed off the mana in the dungeon's air, all that needed to be done was to remove it from the dungeon entirely. With its energy source gone, it would surely stop growing and maybe return to a more manageable size. Of course, it had to kick itself and its familiars into high gear if it hoped to do such a thing.

"Take a left at the next fork, then immediately a right!" shouted Xera from behind the core.

"Whatever you say!" replied Kora from in between Xera's soft thighs.

The fiend was currently busy pushing and guiding the boulder-like crystal through the winding paths at less-than-safe speeds while the succubus sat on her shoulders and acted as the navigator. This posture was humiliating for both of them, but they had no say in the matter since it was a direct order. It was mostly Xera's fault anyway. She had trouble keeping up with them due to her low physical Attributes, not to mention she was the only one who could be trusted with reading the map. And the one who came up with this ridiculous yet surprisingly effective solution was none other than their master.

"Get ready!" shouted Xera again while peeking over the top of the gigantic core. Kora pulled back her right arms in response.

"Aaand… NOW!"

"Ooora!"

Kora's powerful double punch knocked the nearly four hundred kilogram core off-course and steered it down the path her co-contractor had indicated. She did the same with her left arms and knocked it down the tunnel on the right at the next junction. All without once breaking out of her run. Xera, on the other hand, had to cling onto her with all her strength just to avoid being thrown off. It was a good thing the fiend's horns were there for her to grip onto.

"You think you can be a bit more gentle down there?"

"We can trade places if you think you can do a better job at pushing this thing!"

"Never mind!"

"That's what I thought, bubble-boobs!"

The Mimic was in front mostly due to self interest. It was a precaution in case the ever-growing core got stuck in the passages. If that were to happen, then the Mimic could at least find its way out of the dungeon rather than be sealed inside again. Well, it also got some valuable Skill XP along the way so it seemed like the best way of doing things. It felt bad about having to abandon its little 'festival,' but it really had no other choice in the matter.

"To the left!"

"Ooorr-"

"No, MY left!"

"Wha-? We have the same left, you stupid cunt! DOORYA!"

At first it thought the seemingly endless onslaught of monsters was a good thing - like pigs walking into the slaughterhouse all on their own. But it underestimated just how many monsters were in this dungeon. Regardless of how strong they were, the Warlock and its two familiars still needed time to rest and replenish their HP and MP. Kora had already succumbed to the multiple injuries and died once, dropping the core she was still hanging onto in the process. It rolled around on the ground near the Mimic. That's when the chest noticed that its prize had gotten significantly bigger than it had been before.

"Didn't we miss our turn-off just now?"

“No, that was only the second junction, we want the third one! Are your eyes just for decoration?”

“I can’t see over this fucking ball you know!”

That’s when it decided to retreat immediately. Dragging the core along was really slowing them down, though. It had to create an opening using the remainder of Xera’s MP in order to re-summon Kora. With the demonic forklift back online, they were able to move at a much faster pace.

“Left on the crossroads up ahead! It’s a hard turn so watch it!”

“Alright!”

Kora once again adjusted the course of the ball with a paired punch. It bounced off the cave wall and into the right tunnel, but it lost more momentum than expected. Something that was easily rectified by the fiend’s multiple arms pushing it along. Rolling it like this was a pretty fast way of moving it along, though it was hard to control. She could technically deadlift and carry this thing, but didn’t have the headroom to do that once it got to about one hundred and sixty centimeters in diameter.

“Master, we’re in the Green Zone now!” reported Xera over the thought link while struggling to read the map in front of her face. “We should be out of the dungeon shortly!”

“Good,” came the response from the box in front.

“Are you sure we can’t just leave this thing behind and run?” she asked for the umpteenth time.

“I told you, we’re bringing the shiny with us! Now shut up and steer!”

That’s right, it still wanted the shiny thing. There was more to it than that, though.

[Give it up and become a corpse already, loser!]
[Do you wish to become the master of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

The entity on the other side of those messages kept taunting and insulting the Mimic ever since the core had started flashing. Whoever or whatever that thing was, it was obviously connected to this dungeon in some form. Was it

the dungeon itself? Or an overseer of sorts? Could it be some malignant being with a secret agenda?

“Did you just wet yourself up there?!”

“Just your imagination, dearie!”

Details like its real identity didn’t matter, though. The important thing was that the malicious box had already shifted the feelings of resentment it had towards its birthplace onto this mysterious presence and was looking forward to getting some ‘payback.’ And since the core was apparently nigh-indestructible, taking it out of its dungeon seemed like the best way of doing just that. This whole expedition had boiled down to it trying to piss off someone it didn’t even know for no good reason.

Mimics, as it turned out, could really hold a grudge. Even if it was woefully misguided.

“Turn right here! After that it’s a straight shot until we’re out of this place!”

“Okay! Orrrrraaa!”

“I’ll go further ahead. Keep going until you’re out of this cave!”

“Yes, Master!” replied the two demonesses in unison. One might actually get the wrong idea they were getting along if they saw them like this.

The speedy arachno-chest picked up the pace even more and, after several seconds of dashing, burst out from the cave and into the wide cavern that served as the entrance to the Litigar Dungeon Complex. It immediately noticed a group of five or six adventurers, huddled around the alabaster-like pillar that served as this dungeon’s Waystone. They all seemed to be staring wordlessly at the bloodied dwarven waist and legs that had arrived without a torso attached to them.

Well, let’s just say that this particular adventurer’s Portal Key did not quite save them from a mysterious Power Overwhelming-enhanced Shadowbolt. The teleportation effect triggered at the same time as the Spell found its mark, leaving the upper half of the poor bastard splattered on the walls of the dungeon. Meanwhile, his lower body had been transported away to ‘safety,’ resulting in this small huddle of stupefied onlookers staring at it with a mix of disgust and curiosity. And since they were all conveniently bunched up and not facing towards where the Mimic was, it took the opportunity to get

the drop on them. It shifted back into its Xera-assisted casting stance and started chanting Dark Explosion.

“Master! The exit-”

“Quiet! Busy!”

It cut off whatever Xera was trying to say and re-focused its attention on the Spell.

Just as it was about to finish, the flashing boulder-sized crystal crashed into the slightly-too-narrow cave exit. Its momentum carried it through the mouth of the cave, breaking off the rocks and stones in its way and making one hell of a racket in the process. The gathered adventurers all turned to face the origin of the noise. That extremely bizarre sight of a giant red ball rolling behind a naked, well-endowed albino beauty made their brains momentarily skip a beat.

“Dark Explosion ~♪!”

Much like the goblins before, all the people gathered there either became red mist or were flung through the air, dying on impact with the walls and ceiling. The dungeon core smashed into the cavern wall hard, finally coming to a stop. The Mimic quickly retracted its Spell-slinging side and went to check on its prize. The extremely hard crystal was partway embedded in the wall, but completely flawless otherwise. Its familiars were a bit further back, having suffered some damage when they burst through that tight opening along with the core.

“Stop wasting time and get my shiny out of there,” it demanded.

“Yes, Master!” responded Kora. She seemed to be quite fired up for some reason, which was the polar opposite of the succubus who had fallen off the other demon’s shoulders during the impact. She looked like she had run a forty kilometer marathon despite doing none of the physical work.

With the immediate area secured and its minions busy dislodging its prize from the wall, the Mimic finally had a few moments to verify the new Spell it had learned earlier.

[Dark Infusion]
Requirements: Level 17 Warlock, INT 60, MNT 80
School: Domination

Type: Targeted
Cost: 75 MP
Range: 10 Meters
[Effects]
Temporarily increases your target's STR, AGI, DEX and INT Attributes by 20% for 30 seconds.
Your target will be stunned for 5 seconds once the effect expires or is dispelled.
The stun component of this Spell has no effect on Undead, Demons and Golems.

A significant boost in combat potential followed by an extremely dangerous downside. The Mimic would hesitate to use this on itself, but it was possible to empower its familiars 'for free' as it were. It was eager to try it out, but needed to raise its MNT Attribute to 80 before it did that. Otherwise the Spell would backfire and the resulting magical feedback would injure the Caster. It already suffered that pain breaking through the steel grating weeks ago and had no intention of reliving that experience.

There was a loud cracking and rumbling noise as the Mimic finished recalling that painful memory. It seemed that Kora had managed to get the ball out of the wall by punching it real hard. If someone were to ask, 'Did she punch the wall or the core?' the answer would be 'Yes.' Smashing things seemed to be her go-to solution for pretty much every problem. Such an approach would normally be questionable at best, but it was hard to argue with results.

"Good," said the monstrous chest. "We're almost out, so let's go!"

"Yes, Master!" they replied in unison once more, although Xera had significantly less pep in her voice. She was currently lamenting over her immediate future where she would most likely be ordered to babysit a gigantic fucking ball for no good reason. Just the thought of a boring assignment like that seemed to be enough to make her depressed.

This was in stark contrast to the Mimic, which was very much looking forward to worshipping the gigantic ball of shiny. And then it walked over the border of the dungeon with its prize in tow. With the link severed, the dungeon no longer flashed with that obnoxious red. The annoying pop-ups had stopped too.

[You have left the Litigar Dungeon Complex.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Grand Theft Arcana.]
[All Attributes +10.]

Oh right, Perks were a thing.

The box had completely forgotten about them, what with all the running around it had been doing ever since breaking free of this place's control.

[Grand Theft Arcana]
It takes a special kind of person to steal a dungeon from a dungeon.
Requirements: Remove a dungeon core from its dungeon's sphere of influence.
[Effects]
Provides a permanent boost of +10 to all Attributes every time you accomplish this feat.
Number of pilfered dungeons: 1

It would appear that its selfishness and stubbornness had yielded an unexpected boon. The +10 to all Attributes was tasty without a doubt, but finding out this new way of growing stronger was perhaps even tastier than that. Granted, it had no plans of entering another dungeon, but it might end up doing so anyway in order to take advantage of this Perk. Gaining 5 Levels worth of Attributes was nothing to sneeze at, especially considering how slow Leveling Up had become of late.

Although it seemed that the concentrated mass of mana had two more things left to say.

[You are now the owner of dungeon core AD-0429-PR.]
[All functions of dungeon core AD-0429-PR are currently unavailable.]
[Please establish a dungeon to unlock them.]
[WARNING!]
[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]
[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 8 minutes and 19 seconds!]

The Mimic stared intently at those two notifications. The first one seemed to imply that it was now the rightful owner of a dungeon core. It really didn't need some notification window's permission for that, but at least it made things official, in a way. Now all that was left was to deal with that second one. There was just one problem.

“Snack,” it called out, much to Kora’s amusement, “is a ‘catastrophic meltdown’ a tasty thing?”

Just knowing what something was called didn’t mean it could understand what it actually was.

“Huh? What?” replied the succubus. She was aware of the meaning behind those words, but what worried her was the reason her master suddenly inquired after them. Then realization hit her like a cannonball to the face.

“Wait… don’t tell me the core is going to-”

CRACK

A tiny fracture appeared on the crystal ball. Rays of white light seemed to pour out of that tiny gap.

“Not tasty!” she yelled out immediately. “Master, that core is very much not tasty! We should get rid of it! No, we have to run away from it at full speed!”

“Don’t wanna. It’s my shiny!” came the selfish reply one would expect out of a toddler.

“Look, Master, that core is going to explode. It’s going to blow up and none of us will survive! Being alive is much tastier than having a big shiny thing, right?!”

It didn’t deny her outright this time and pondered her words. A certain invisible presence that was the cause of this situation would do well to take notes here. **This** was the proper way to negotiate with a Mimic. Except that it was taking its sweet time deciding, which made Xera a bit nervous. No matter how much it wanted to keep the shiny, surely it didn’t want to be killed for it, right?

“Hey bubble-boobs,” whispered Kora. “Why are you so insistent with this? If the Master bites it we get to run off and do what we want, right?”

“You know that box has a lot more HP than either of us, right?” she whispered back. “Do you honestly think our bodies would survive a blast that it could not?”

“How strong a boom are we talking about here?”

“Only dust will be left behind. And that’s if we’re lucky.”

Kora crossed her arms in front of her chest and closed her eyes. One could practically hear the rusty gears springing to life inside her head.

No master means no contract. No contract means I get to play around all I want. That's good. But dying sends me back to the Beyond. I can't be summoned back unless I have a contract. Which means that if both of us die at the same time...

"Master!" she blurted out after reaching the painfully obvious conclusion. "We should get rid of that glowy thing right now!"

"Okay," it responded.

It wasn't actually torn between life and shiny, despite appearances to the contrary. It was just lamenting having to let go of this thing after going through so much trouble to secure it, but there was no way around it. At first it wasn't sure if Snack was telling the truth, but that whispered conversation with Arms showed she was acting out of self-preservation. It was an instinct the Mimic was very supportive of. Therefore, it would listen to its familiars this time and do as they suggested.

It just had one major problem.

What do I do with it?

[WARNING!]
[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]
[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 7 minutes!]

Whatever it was going to do, it needed to do it fast. It could always roll it back into the dungeon, but that idea didn't sit right with it. Sure it might be able to blow this place up and destroy it, but that annoying pop-up might be able to reclaim the core somehow. Perhaps that's what it was expecting? But if not the dungeon, then was there any other place nearby where it could-

"Ah!" it exclaimed. "Arms, get the shiny outside! Fast!"

The three of them went out of the cavern and into the open air. It was already past noon, as evidenced by the sun's position in the sky. It seemed its little dungeon crawl had taken quite a bit of time.

The Mimic looked along the dirt road that led towards the nearby city of Monotal. There were a few figures moving along it in the distance, obviously traveling between that place and the dungeon.

But that's not what was important. The road itself was flat, mostly straight and on a downhill slope that went pretty much all the way to the city.

"Arms, push the shiny down that road! Give it to that big place with the walls!"

"Huh?" replied Kora, dumbfounded. She had no idea what her master was going on about.

Xera, however, immediately caught on. Her face adopted an expression that seemed to say 'Oh, I see!' louder than any words could. Dumping the dangerous thing on the humans was a perfect way of getting rid of it. How come she didn't think of that? It was honestly a little annoying to be outsmarted by that blasted box. Still, this was an idea she liked a lot.

"Allow me to guide her to the city, Master," she offered.

"Okay. Arms, follow Snack's lead!"

"Pfft! **Ahem** Yes, Master!"

The red-skinned fiend pushed the core down the road while the succubus took to the skies to keep from falling behind. Using her wings at high speed inside that narrow dungeon was tantamount to suicide, but out here she could soar as high as she wanted.

Their master watched them depart on their assignment for a few seconds before it started running in the opposite direction. There was no telling how big that explosion was going to be, but judging from how much mana it soaked up it was easy to tell it wasn't going to be a small one. Therefore, putting as much distance between itself and that orb was the obvious thing to do. Just like Xera had pointed out, nothing is tastier than being able to stay alive!

It ran through the forest. It went up some hills and down others, around rocks and trees. A river was forded at some point. A few wild animals and monsters were gobbled up along the way.

[Proficiency level increased. Biomass is now Level 3. All Attributes +1.]

Okay, it was more like a few dozen wild animals and monsters, but right now wasn't the time to argue semantics.

[WARNING!]

[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]

[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 2 minutes!]

“Snack, what’s going on over there?” it inquired through the thought link.

“We’re coming up on the gates now, Master. We’re going to try to force our way through.”

“Huh? Inside the walls?”

“Yes, it’ll do more damage if we bring it closer to the middle of the city.”

That was true. Dark Explosion was a Spell that had to be aimed in such a way so that it hit as many things as possible. The scale of this core meltdown was likely to be much larger, but the same logic applied.

[WARNING!]

[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]

[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 60 seconds!]

It contemplated such things while it made its way through the wilderness. After a short while, it got a rather sudden update.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

Xera had been done in, likely by the city’s defenders.

“Arms, what’s going on?”

“ORRA! Oh, Master! DORRYA! We got past the wooden gate with brute force but- ORA ORA ORA ORA! - there are too many humans!”

“Keep them busy for a while longer.”

“Hahaha! Gladly!”

The Mimic ended up bursting through the treeline and onto a small clearing. There was a lone road along a small cliff that gave it a clear, unobstructed view towards the walled-off city in the distance. Several streaks of black smoke were visible, probably a result of that pyromaniac Pyromancer’s magic.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

Ah, it seemed Kora finally went down. She held out a lot longer than the Mimic was expecting. Maybe it was due to that weird ‘Second Wind’ Skill she had. The chest decided it would be best to more thoroughly investigate her Status later.

[WARNING!]

[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]

[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 30 seconds!]

There wasn't much time left. Should it keep running? Then again, another thirty seconds would hardly make a difference if that explosion could reach this far… Then what about going underground? Yes, that seemed like a good idea!

The chest shapeshifted its spider legs so that their 'feet' were more like shovels and less like needles and began eagerly digging into the soil. This was the same technique it used to hide itself in the ground shortly before its Rank Up, so it felt confident about its effectiveness.

[WARNING!]

[Dungeon core AD-0429-PR is over maximum MP capacity by 953%!]

[Catastrophic meltdown will occur in 10 seconds!]

By this point, the chest had already dug out a hole about one meter deep. Going deeper at this stage seemed to be meaningless, so it instead braced for impact.

At that moment, nearly seven kilometers away, a group of adventurers and guards were cautiously circling the ominous red ball. Cracks ran along its surface as more and more rays of light streamed out. It was audibly buzzing at this point. They were unsure about what to do with this strange object that a couple of renegade demons had brought into their city. Some of them felt it prudent to run the hell away, while others thought to quarantine it somehow. If they had a few more minutes, they might be able to teleport it away from them with magic.

But they didn't and the core ruptured.

There was a flash of light so bright that it blinded about a dozen unfortunate travelers and merchants who happened to be facing that direction.

...

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -5463.]

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -6478.]

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -5312.]

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -4843.]

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -7603.]

[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -6422.]
[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -4041.]
[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -3368.]
[Your target has been disintegrated. HP -3963.]
…

It took but a fraction of a second to reap the lives of 8,235 people. That wasn't counting all the animals and monsters, domestic or otherwise, that got caught up in the blast. All of those were considered an attack made by the Mimic, and all of those events relayed their less-than-useful results back to the perpetrator.

The onslaught of status messages scrolled on and on and on seemingly without end, assaulting the Mimic's consciousness until it nearly blacked out.

"Zeeh, zeeh, zeeh."

Nearly, though. It panted heavily inside its impromptu foxhole, reeling from the mental impact. If it wasn't for its MNT it would probably have ended up stunned again. Just as it calmed down, it felt the ear-splitting noise of the core meltdown wash over it, followed almost immediately by the shockwave of the blast. It shook its little hidey-hole as if a major earthquake had taken place.

All things said and done, it lost about 300 HP in the ordeal. It fared much better than its victims, though. And then it finally got the all-important summary.

[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
…
…
[Congratulations, you are now a level 33 Mimic! All attributes +16.]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 22 Warlock! INT +10. MNT +10. END +10.]
[You have learned a new Spell: Shadowbind]
[You have learned a new Spell: Mind Blast]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Butcher of Humanity.]

[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Collateral Damage.]
[Proficiency level increased. Summon Familiar is now Level 6. INT +2. WIS +1. MNT +1.]
[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 3. WIS +2. MNT +2.]

The Mimic calmed itself down and climbed out of its little hole, then looked towards where the city once stood. All that was left in its place was a glowing crater and a gigantic mushroom-shaped cloud of smoke and dust. The green plains and thick forest around it had been turned to gray ash. The monster's selfish actions had left a scar on this world that would never truly heal.

"Neat!"

That was all it had to say on the matter, though. So what if it brought about a calamity that wiped out an entire city? It reaped a massive profit in Levels, and that's all it cared about. No, that's not quite right. There was also the matter of unlocking new Restricted Skills.

First and foremost, the oddly nostalgic Mimic Skills.

[Skill List: Mimic]
Unlocked Skills: Assassination, Storage, Cadaver Absorption, Biomass
Available Skills: Natural Armor, Misdirection, Create Fleshling, Liquid Mimicry, Metal Mimicry
You can unlock 1 additional Restricted Skill from this Job.

Create Fleshling was a Skill that would create a miniature, semi-sentient version of the Mimic to serve as its minion. However, these creatures would die after a set amount of time and could only follow pre-set orders, not to mention that separating chunks off its own body was obviously going to be unhealthy.

In short, Summon Familiar suited its needs much better. Therefore, it passed over this one.

Liquid Mimicry was also offered at Level 20, along with Create Fleshling and Biomass. It allowed the Mimic to recreate almost any non-magical liquid the Mimic knew about by expending MP. However, anything created by this Skill would disappear after a while and it was impossible to create

alchemical products like potions and poisons. Therefore it was passed over for Biomass.

And now it seemed that it only got one new option.

[Metal Mimicry]
The ability to turn flesh and bone into steel and iron
Requirements: Level 30 Mimic, Shapeshift, Biomass, STR 100, END 100
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Flesh can be shapeshifted into any known non-magical metal.
MP will be consumed depending on how much of the body is turned to metal.
The transformation will fade after 15 minutes.
Reduces the MP consumption of Metal Mimicry by 5% per Level of this Skill.

The Mimic actually stopped to think about this one. It looked attractive, but several concerns gave it pause. While it would be possible to create arms and armor on the spot, it would come at a heavier price than what was obvious at first glance.

Metal was hard, heavy and inflexible. Hard was a good thing. Right now the Mimic could instantly cover its body with something that looked like steel, but that wouldn't mean it would be anywhere near as tough. It was still shapeshifter flesh under the shiny surface and would not actually block attacks any better. Therefore, having the legitimate toughness of steel was extremely attractive. It probably wouldn't have to worry about running out of weapons, either.

But the other two characteristics of metal were downsides. Heavy meant it would take a LOT of its body mass to create it. Therefore, the actual amount of metal it could 'produce' would be quite limited. As for inflexible, let's just say the Mimic was worried whether it could move joints that were turned to steel. The answer would most likely be 'no.'

Therefore, rather than gamble on an unknown, it revisited and reversed a decision it had made a long time ago.

[Proficiency level increased. Natural armor is now Level 1. END +6.]

[Natural Armor]
Monsters are known for their tough hides that can shrug off anything and everything.
Requirements: Level 5 Monster Job, END 10
Type: Passive
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Reduces all incoming damage by 1% per Level of this Skill.
Provides an additional +2 END per Level of this Skill.

'I don't need it if I don't get hit' was the sort of naive thinking that had nearly gotten it killed in that dungeon. Therefore, while it may not be flashy, it picked the most reliable-looking Skill it could. Besides, it would probably need it if something went wrong when working with the other Skill it wanted.

[Proficiency level increased. Crystallize Magic is now Level 1. INT +2. WIS +2.]

While the sentient chest still felt apprehensive at the thought of blowing itself up, it was hard to argue with the results from the dungeon core meltdown. The event had also given it a really good idea for how to handle the potentially dangerous Spell Crystals. It just had to have someone extremely expendable take care of it!

Speaking of which.

"Ohh! I'm back!" shouted Kora after her summoning. "Woah!? Is that the city in the distance?!"

"What's left of it."

"WAAAAHAHAHAHAHA!" The fiend threw her hands in the air and let out a stream of hearty laughter. "Serves you right, you blondie! Let's see you try 'cleansing this world of my taint' when you're nothing but dust!"

"Blondie?" inquired the chest, curiously.

“Ahn? Oh yeah, there was this guy with a really shiny sword and flashy, spiky hairdo. Super annoying. Kept prattling on about justice and whatnot while I was busy ripping this other guy limb from limb. Those Hero types are always a buzzkill, you know?”

“I don’t.”

“... Oh, right. You’re only like three months old, huh?”

“Yes.”

“Well, you’ll find out soon enough. Hmm? Hey, my body seems to be overflowing with power compared to before! Did you Level up from that?”

“Yes, many times. Got Skills and Perks too.”

A very tasty result indeed. As for the Perks, the first one seemed to be quite useful.

[Butcher of Humanity]
Repetition is the mother of learning. Especially when it comes to murder.
Requirements: Kill more than 5,000 humans.
[Effects]
Increases all damage dealt to humans by 5%.
Killing a human invigorates you, restoring 2% of max HP and MP.

The Mimic fought humans a lot. It would probably keep on fighting them, so being more effective against them was a good thing to be sure!

[Collateral Damage]
Like exploding fish in a barrel.
Requirements: Hit more than 20 targets with a single attack.
[Effects]
Increases the radius of Area Effect Spells, Skills and Martial Arts by 10%.

The other one... Well, it made the Mimic feel a bit cheated. Still, considering its plans for Crystallize Magic, it was far from a useless Perk.

“Where’s the walking pair of boobs?” asked Kora.

“Does such a tasty-sounding thing exist?”

“Uhm, yeah, the succubus you call your, heh, your Snack.”

“Oh! Yes, I’ll summon her soon.”

Kora went back to enjoying the aftermath of her hard work while the Mimic was recovering its MP. After a minute or so, it summoned Xera.

“Greetings, Master. Oh wow!” she said when she saw the mushroom cloud.

“I know, right?!” exclaimed Kora. “I don’t think anyone survived that thing!”

“Yes, I can see that. I must say this is… much more devastating than I thought it would be.”

“You’ve seen this sort of thing before?”

“Sort of. I was caught up in something like that along with an old master, but this is my first time seeing the aftermath.”

Xera gave a sigh. She was actually counting on at least one person who saw her wonderful acting to survive that. This world would become a lot more interesting if that were the case. Well, it was a hastily thrown together idea anyway, so brooding over its failure would be pointless.

“Where to now, Master?”

“…”

The Mimic really hadn’t thought that far ahead. Somewhere it needed to go? No, not in particular. Some task to accomplish? Nothing came to mind. Something it wanted to get? Yes. Plenty of things, actually.

“I want tasty things! Shiny things too! Ah, and potions! And troll blood. Lots of troll blood, actually. What’s a troll anyway? Is it tasty? It sounds like it might be tasty. Oh and I need to find out what happens when Warlock gets Level 25. And good swords too! Shiny swords! Snack! Where can I find all those things?!”

“Uhm… going to another city would be a good place to start, I guess?”

She knew a big city would have libraries, Blacksmiths and Alchemists. The ‘shiny things’ it wanted were obviously gold, maybe jewels. Those could also be gotten easily in a city if one were ruthless enough.

“Oh! Where’s that?!”

“I’m not sure, Master.”

She knew her way around a map, but had no idea where they were right now. She'd never heard of a place called Monotal until a week ago. Well, technically speaking it wasn't really a place anymore.

"We could always follow the road until we find some travelers we can, huhu, squeeze for information."

"Okay. Let's do that! Arms! We're leaving!"

"Eh? Huh? Oh! On my way!"

Kora had been staring reverently at the former city. It seemed she wasn't quite done appreciating the scenery. She had high hopes for the future too. How many demons could claim they helped destroy an entire city on the first day of their new contract?! She was sure her master's name would spread throughout the Beyond if she-

"Huh? Master, you don't have a name?"

"No. Are names tasty?"

"Well… Even if you ask me that…" Kora looked inquisitively at Xera, silently asking for help.

The succubus let out another sigh. How did this moron not figure it out yet?

"Tasty means good. It also means tasty," she explained.

"Oh. Oh! Yeah, Master! Names are tasty! You can do fun things like yelling 'Bow before the terrible might of Koralenteprix!' at people right before you smash them! It's even better if they bow, because you can really squish their head against the ground!"

The Mimic had absolutely no idea what Kora was getting at. Still, it had to admit that it was curious. But how would one go about getting a name? Maybe if it opened its Status and thought really hard about its own name?

[You are currently unnamed.]
[Would you like a name to randomly be assigned to you?]
[Yes]
[No]

Well, at least this one seemed easy. It chose 'Yes' without a second thought.

A few moments later, its new name appeared in the Status and was then communicated to its familiars through their respective contracts.

“Hahahaha! Nice one, Master! Aaaah hah hah hah! That’s amazing!”

“Oh, come on! What sort of name is that?! Are you kidding me with this shit?! There’s no way I’m calling you that!”

Kora burst into laughter while Xera seemed to have some objections. The Mimic was actually quite happy with it though. If a name could be tasty, then this one most certainly was.

[General Information]
Boxxy T. Morningwood
Mimic (Greater), Genderless, 3 months old
Level 33.43 Mimic
Level 22.12 Warlock
900/900 HP (+2.0/sec)
815/815 MP (+1.0/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 110, DEX 118, AGI 98, END 158, INT 163, WIS 103, LCK 57, MNT 107, CHR 34

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 5.60
Storage - Lvl 4.34
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 4.85
Biomass - Lvl 3.11
Natural Armor - Lvl 1.00
[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar - Lvl 6.85
Power Overwhelming - Lvl 3.26
Demonology - Lvl 3.12
Crystallize Magic - Lvl 1.00
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 6.70
Stealth - Lvl 4.94
Sword Mastery - Lvl 6.36
Projectile Mastery - Lvl 2.44
Dagger Mastery - Lvl 3.21
Ruin Mastery - Lvl 5.30
Domination Mastery - Lvl 3.37

[Spell List]
Ruin - Shadowbolt, Ebonfire, Frostbite, Dark Explosion, Shadowbind
Domination - Mass Panic, Delirium, Dark Infusion, Mind Blast

Epilogue

Emperor Joseph Frederick von Einhart the Third leaned back in his high chair and cursed under his breath. The subject of the documents on his desk was more than a little upsetting. It was a good thing his retainers and servants were forbidden from entering his study without permission, otherwise he would have to bottle up his emotions to maintain the image worthy of an emperor. An especially difficult task for a young man barely out of his teens, but one that was both his birthright and his responsibility. His father had passed away suddenly a year ago due to illness, so the young lad had been suddenly thrust into the spotlight, regardless of his will or intentions. As ruler of the human-dominated Lodrak Empire, one of the three great nations on this continent, he could never be allowed to show weakness.

Still, he looked around the room, as if that would somehow relieve him of the burden of his post. The heavy wooden desk in front of him was completely bare, save for a few writing utensils and the aforementioned report. The afternoon sun shone in from the window behind him, providing ample light with which to read said documents. The floor was covered by a soft, dark gray carpet and the stone walls were covered by tapestries and banners - relics of the past.

To his left and right were tall bookshelves, filled with the lore, knowledge, poetry and history of his ancestors. The stone busts of five of those ancestors adorned the top of the shelves, looking all stern, stoic and regal, with well-kept beards and stern expressions. A far cry from the baby-faced, blond-haired young man currently sitting in their chair. Looking up at the flat ceiling revealed an intricate mosaic that depicted several more of those dead Emperors during their crowning moments of glory, reminding Joseph just how insignificant his rule may turn out to be.

The young emperor sighed. None of those dead men were going to help him calm down. If anything, they seemed to press down on him, increasing the already immense pressure on his shoulders. He secretly dreaded having all of his forefathers stare at him day and night, but wouldn’t dare suggest having the busts removed or the ceiling painted over. There were many in the royal palace who thought he was unworthy of succeeding his late father and should be replaced with a more capable regent.

I'll show them, he thought. *How dare that scum underestimate me! I've been preparing for this position my whole life! So what if it came earlier than expected? I'll teach those cretins a thing or two about speaking out against the Emperor!*

Joseph sighed again. Such thoughts were neither productive nor entertaining. He turned to the damnable booklet on his desk once more. He really did not want to read through it again, but he had to commit every last syllable to memory. His young mind had been schooled in the ways of politics and statesmanship ever since he was six years old, so there was no way he wouldn't understand the grave significance of the event it was concerned with. That didn't help his mood, though. Even if the logical mind understood he had to read it, his emotions demanded he burn the file and be done with it.

Just the title of it was enough to ruin his mood.

A report on The Calamity of Monotal by Spymaster E. G. Allen

He had heard about it, of course. Every soul in the Empire had by now, and the news would likely spread to the whole continent within the month. He flipped it open and started reading through it. At least Edward, the Spymaster, did not dress up the facts with pointless words and analogies like the rest of his court. Though perhaps if anything needed some flowerful language, it was this.

The city of Monotal is no more. Just as early reports had stated, the city was completely wiped out approximately two weeks ago, on the 8th day of this month. Nothing of the city remains, save for a large crater and an ever-swirling cloud of dust. The estimated death toll is at least 8,000 souls - the entire population of Monotal.

"Sweet Teresa's tits…" mumbled Joseph.

Only when he was alone could he allow himself to say such thing. An Emperor blaspheming upon the names of the Gods was a good way to earn the ire of their faithful, after all. This common sense went double for the followers of Teresa the Hammer, Goddess of truth, order, justice and retribution. In all honesty though, who could blame the man? This report confirmed that the worst case scenario he dreaded with his entire being had indeed taken place. Four sentences in and he already felt ill, but he pushed on regardless.

The Calamity has also rendered all the soil within six kilometers of the epicenter completely infertile. The Druids and Shamans we consulted said restoration is impossible and the land will be left barren for centuries. Arcanium investigators say the cause is the same as the ever-swirling green dust cloud, a magical anomaly they're calling the Rift. It's playing havoc on the environment and poisoning the ground and the air around it with some unknown form of magic. Approaching the Rift causes one's body to rapidly wither and decay, making it nigh-impossible for living beings to get near it. Arcanium investigators say they've never seen anything like it, but are currently following a lead that suggests it's somehow linked to the fabled Calamity of Tol-Saroth.

No wonder they were referring to both events as calamities. According to the history books, Tol-Saroth was an elven Warlock said to have lived about four hundred and thirty years ago. The records claimed he was responsible for making an entire human fort disappear overnight through some terrible magic ritual. The exact details of the account had been mostly lost to time and the event mostly dismissed as being blown way out of proportion by historians of the past.

However, even lies had a hint of truth within them, and it was the duty of the organization known as the Arcanium to determine fact from fiction. If those eggheads claimed there was a chance that the two Calamities were somehow connected, then there was a good chance that may indeed have been the case.

Joseph shook his head to clear it of idle thoughts and turned his attention back to the report.

We have detained and interrogated 32 individuals who witnessed the Calamity from afar- 4 hunters, 3 bandits, 2 merchants, 10 adventurers and 13 travelers. Their first-hand accounts all state they saw a bright white light coming at them from the direction of Monotal. Over half of them were rendered blind by the event. The Arcanium currently has them under quarantine, since the eyes of all victims glow with an unnatural green light, much like that of the Rift. Neither alchemy nor magic have been able to heal their sight.

What followed then was a transcription of all thirty-two interviews wherein they recounted that horrible day. Oddly enough, none of them had a direct

line of sight to Monotal, nor were all of them looking in that direction. Indeed, three of them were adventurers exploring a cave in the wilderness, yet they still went blind despite being underground. It would seem the Arcanium believed them to have been within six kilometers of the city, and the facts supported this theory.

Of particular note is a bizarre scene my scouts found along the Imperial Highway. They found what appeared to be the site of a bandit attack, but a closer inspection revealed it was something more. A small crater was in the middle of the road, filled with dust and ash that we believe to have once been people. It is highly likely they were used as sacrifices for some obscure ritual.

Investigating the area around this site led us to an old fort that had been abandoned after the conclusion of the Great War some 400 years ago. The place was in ruins and looked to have been used as a base by a group of bandits. However, the keep's central tower appeared to have been knocked down only recently and excavating the dungeon underneath it revealed a malnourished and badly injured human prisoner. He was barely alive and highly delirious, likely gone mad from the living hell he had been put through, but his interrogation still revealed some useful information before he was executed for his crimes.

This man had been a part of a small-time group of bandits that called themselves 'The Redcaps.' He admitted it was their group that initiated an ambush upon a merchant convoy on the day of the Calamity. They had engaged the adventurers protecting the convoy in battle and seemed to have the upper hand, but were interrupted by the appearance of a tall, green-haired, red-skinned, four-armed demon. It is my belief that this demon is the same one reported by the Hero. As for the final fate of those adventurers, it is clear they, along with the rest of the bandits, had been turned to dust.

The Spymaster then went on to describe what he believed to be the sequence of events that led up to that point. To sum it up, the bandits and adventurers at that ambush site were sacrificed in order to create a weapon of mass destruction, likely the same one used in the Calamity of Tol-Saroth. That mysterious red crystal was then escorted by its creator and a certain four-armed demon through the main gate of Monotal, where they encountered heavy resistance in the form of the Hero of the Hammer, Bernard Samson, and his four companions.

Emperor Joseph had met Bernard personally and had a favorable impression of the valiant adventurer. How could he not? The mantle of Hero could only be granted by the Gods, and that valiant young man had been chosen as the champion of the Goddess Teresa herself. He had been given the noble task of protecting the weak and bringing monsters, evildoers and criminals alike to justice. His ultimate task had been to become strong enough to lead an expedition into the Blighted Lands to the far north and destroy the terrible being that called itself 'The Boneshaper.' It was a Quest that would no doubt go down in legend.

And yet that ended abruptly thanks to the Calamity. Bernard was caught up in it and lost his life. He was able to resurrect at the Temple of Teresa, here in the capital, by the grace of the Goddess. Truly a miracle only a Hero could pull off. However, Teresa's divine protection did not extend to his companions, who were now forever gone. In fact, Joseph suspected the Hero himself had never truly come back either.

The vibrant, energetic person the Emperor once knew was gone. In his place was someone who had lost everything near and dear to him, a hollow, wretched man with eyes like a dead fish and no purpose in life. The monotone voice he used to describe the events of two weeks ago betrayed he truly wished he had died along with his childhood friends, and had reportedly tried to commit suicide at least twice since then. Humanity had lost a Hero that day, and from his testimony it was crystal clear who was at fault.

"Fucking twigs," cursed Emperor Einhart, his young heart seething with rage. "This is all their doing!"

The prime suspect in this whole incident was an elven Witch, one who sacrificed dozens, possibly hundreds of people to create that horrible weapon. She had made her intentions crystal clear to everyone around them when Bernard had cornered her and was just about to subdue her. The crazy bitch then set herself on fire, cackling madly about how 'The Elven Dominion shall rise again!' while she burned alive.

"Those insufferable, inferior fucking terrorists! They'll pay. They'll all pay! Them and all their fucking kind!"

Of course he knew blaming this calamity on the entire elven race was ludicrous. Attributing the acts of an individual to an entire people was

something only a madman would do. Granted, Joseph was mad, but it was more of the ‘I want to break something’ type of mad, rather than the ‘I’m going to make my horse a Baron’ mad. He never liked those elves. Even while his father was alive, he kept hearing of their so called ‘freedom fighters.’ It was always his suspicion that those fucking twigs were somehow responsible for his father’s untimely demise. Truthfully, he had wanted to invade their pitiful country and wipe out their entire race ever since he became Emperor, but his advisors and nobles were firmly against such action.

“Well. We’ll see how those geezers feel about our ‘neighbors’ when they find out exactly how much we lost thanks to them.”

Things had always been uneasy between the human-dominated Lodrak Empire and the Ishigar Republic that lay on its northern border. It was only natural considering the latter was the last remnant of the ancient Elven Dominion, which had fallen apart as a direct result of the Empire’s efforts. To say these two nations and their people had bad blood between them would be an understatement, and there was always some nasty incident or another to deal with.

But this unforgivable act of terrorism went beyond petty territorial or trade disputes. The elf-spawned Calamity had caused the death of over 8,000 men, women and children. It left behind a stretch of poisonous, barren wasteland that was nothing more than a festering wound in the heart of the Empire. It also left humanity’s first Hero in over fifty years as a shell of his former self, a man who openly wished he was allowed to die with his loved ones.

The aftershocks of this catastrophic event would probably be felt for years, decades even, and there was only one way the young emperor could interpret it.

“This is a declaration of war, isn’t it?”

Afterword

Hello, dear reader! I'm glad to see you've made it to the end of the book! Unless you skipped to the end, in which case - shame on you. Either way, I do hope you enjoyed it. The whole thing started off as an in-joke that was made in somewhat poor taste and was written almost entirely off the cuff. The original idea I had for the protagonist was that of a piece of shit warlock with no morals going on realm-hopping adventures in search of power. I eventually settled on a professional chest impersonator after coming across the following D&D anecdote:

The barkeep asked why we carried weapons into his bar. I said 'Mimics.' The party laughed. The barkeep laughed. The table laughed. We killed the table. Good times.

The setting and progression system borrows a lot of inspiration from various role-playing games, both of the tabletop and video variety, as well as some webcomics and a pinch of anime. And by 'borrows a lot of inspiration' I mean to say 'ripped off and stitched together like some kind of Frankenstein's monster of a book.' However, I have confidence that the seams were not noticeable. Taking various elements from different sources and cramming them together in a way that works and makes logical sense is a skillset I've developed as a programmer. My day job is also why I'm very particular about the wording when it comes to the various game elements.

Ambiguity regarding game mechanics is something you do not want in your RPG, after all.

The main character's personality is something I like to think of as 'a toddler with a gun.' That's why its actions seem to go from oddly adorable one second to incredibly horrific in the next. It is also what lets me keep readers like you guessing as to what it would do next. And in case you were wondering, the creature most definitely does not become 'humanized' later on in the story. Its goals and motivations vary somewhat, but the pursuit of tasty and/or shiny things remains a constant. There is no 'redemption' to be found here. Just an incorrigible selfish bastard of a box that follows its own agenda and tramples over anything or anyone that gets in its way.

That’s not to say it doesn’t have a positive impact here and there, though. You’d be surprised at how tasty bandits can be. Boxxy also has no qualms with performing a public service or two if it pays well. But how does a murderous chest with an appetite for man-flesh blend into a civilized society? Not very well, as you might imagine! However, it does give it its best shot, which you can be witness to if you read Volume 2 of the series, which is coming to Kindle Soon™.

In closing, I think I did pretty good for my first published book, though it’s by no means my first work of fiction. That being the case, I’d really appreciate it if you rated it and left a review on Amazon. Stuff like that really helps new authors like myself gain traction, and would encourage me to publish more of the series.

If you enjoyed this book, please be sure to check out Life Reset by Shemer Kuznits. What it lacks for in the large chests department it makes up for in monster-kingdom building, and it even has a hot goblin babe!

Well, that’s all I had to say. I wish you many shiny days and tasty experiences in the future, dear reader. And please, do be wary of carelessly approaching large chests.

Toodles!

Their Terrifying Plan

VERNON COLEMAN

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NATALIE PORTMAN is an Oscar winner for best actress, director, producer, activist and starred in films such as **Closer: Too Close, V for Vendetta, The Professional, Cold Mountain, Love and Darkness, Jackie, Thor: Love and Thunder,** several of the franchise Star Wars, in addition to **Black Swan.** She was born in Jerusalem, Israel, graduated from Harvard University and currently lives with her family in Los Angeles. **Fábulas** is his first illustrated book.

THE AUTHOR

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JANNA MATTIA was born and raised in San Diego. She graduated with a degree in Entertainment Illustration from Laguna College of Art and Design and now works in concept and character art in films, licensed illustrations and commissions. This is her debut as a book illustrator. Learn more about her at jannamattia.com.

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Stress Management Techniques
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The Health Scandal
The 20 Minute Health Check
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Why Doctors Da More Harm Than Good
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Complete Guide to Sex
How to Conquer Backache
How to Conquer Patn
Betrayal of Trust
Know Your Drugs

Food for Thought
The Traditronal Home Doctor
Reltef from IBS
The Parent's Handbook
Men in Bras, Panties and Dresses
Power over Cancer
How to Conquer Arthritis
How to Stop Your Doctor Killing You
Superbody
Stomach Problems - Relief at Last
How to Overcome Guilt
How to Live Longer
Coleman's Laws
Millions of Alzheimer Patients Have Been Misdiagnosed
Climbing Trees at 112
Is Your Health Written tn the Stars?
The Kick-Ass A-Z for over 60s
Briefs Encounter
The Benzos Story
Dementia Myth
Waiting

Psychology/Sociology
Stress Control
How to Overcome Toxic Stress
Know Yourself (1988)
Stress and Relaxation
People Watching
Spiritpower
Toxic Stress
I Hope Your Penis Shrivels Up

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Oral Sex Bad Taste and Hard To Swallow
Other People’s Problems
The 100 Sexiest, Craziest, Most Outrageous Agony Column Questions (and Answers) Of All Trme
How to Relax and Overcome Stress
Too Sexy To Print
Psychiatry
Are You Living With a Psychopath?

Politics and General
England Our England
Rogue Nation
Confronting the Global Bully
Saving England
Why Everything Is Going To Get Worse Before It Gets Better
The Truth They Won't Tell You. About The EU
Living In a Fascist Country
How to Protect & Preserve Your Freedom, Identity & Prnvacy
Oul Apocalypse
Gordon ts a Moron
The OFPIS File
What Happens Next?
Bloodless Revolution
2020
Stuffed
The Shocking History of the EU
Coming Apocalypse
Covid 19 The Greatest Hoax in History
Old Man ina Chair
Endgame
Proof that Masks do more harm than Good
Covid-19 The Fraud Continues
Covid 19 Exposting the Lies
Social Credit Nightmare on Your Street
NHS What's wrong and how to put it nght
They want your money and your life

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Diaries and Autobiographies
Diary of a Disgruntled Man
Just another Bloody Year
Bugger off and Leave Me Alone
Return of the Disgruntled Man
Life on the Edge
The Game's Afoot
Tickety Tonk
Memortes 1
Memories 2
Memories 3
My Favourite Books

Animals
Why Animal Experiments Must Stop
Fighting For Animals
Alice and Other Fnends
Animal Rights - Human Wrongs
Animal Experiments - Simple Truths

General Non Fiction
How to Publish Your Own Book
How to Make Money While Watching TV
Strange but True
Daily Inspirations
Why Is Public Hair Curly
People Push Bottles Up Peaceniks
Secrets of Paris
Money power
101 Things I Have Learned
100 Greatest Englishmen and Englishwamen
Cheese Rolling, Shin Kicking and Ugly Tattoos
One Thing after Another

Novels (General)
Mrs Caldicot’'s Cabbage War

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Mrs Caldicot's Knickerbocker Glory
Mrs Caldicot’s Oyster Parade
Mis Caldicot’s Turkish Delight
Deadline
Second Chance
Tunnel
Mr Henry Mulligan
The Truth Kalls
Revolt
My Secret Years with Elvis

Balancing the Books
Doctor in Paris
Stones with a Twist in the Tale (short stories)
Dr Bullock’s Annals
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The Young Country Doctor Series
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Bilbury Joys
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Bilbury Days
Bilbury Memores

Novels (Sport)
Thomas Winsden’s Cricketing Almanack
Diary of a Cricket Lover

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The Village Cneket Tour
The Man Who Inhented a Golf Course
Around the Wicket
Too Many Clubs and Not Enough Balls

Cat books
Ahce’s Diary
Alice’s Adventures
We Love Cats
Cats Own Annual
The Secret Lives of Cats
Cat Basket
The Cataholics’ Handbook
Cat Fables
Cat Tales
Catoons from Catland

As Edward Vernon
Practice Makes Perfect
Practise What You Preach
Getting Into Practice
Aphrodisiacs — An Owner's Manual

The Complete Guide to Life

Written with Donna Antoinette Coleman
How to Conquer Health Problems between Ages 50 & 120
Health Secrets Doctors Share With Their Farmilies
Animal Miscellany
England’s Glory
Wisdom of Animals

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Dedicated to Antoinette
Thank you for being you and for being with me.

Thank you for every day you spend with
me. Every day 1s a gift from God

* Over that little life that still remains to me,
and at my death, deign that your hand be present.

You know You are the only hope I have’
(From the Canzoniere by Petrarch)

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Part Four Here's what you. can do
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Part One SHARE = EDIT DELE!

1
It is customary, when wnting a book explaming how and why something has happened, to put the history bits first, to explain the past before dealing with the present and, possibly, the future

In this book I have done the opposite
I have begun, in Part One, with an account of the world in which we hve,

drawing attention to the anomalies and mconsistences, the threats and dangers and soon Itis an objective analysis of the world in which we hve, and the anomahes and apparent coincidences which now make up our everyday lives

In Part Three, I have analysed the events which have brought us to this unhappy state, the very brink of the Great Reset and the New World Order In this part of the book IJ have explained in some detail the who, the why, the what, the when and the how Many apparently unconnected events have taken us slowly but certainly towards the position we are mn now' on the very bonk of the Great Reset and a permanent loss of our freedom and the essentials of our humanity

It can be confusing and bewildering to try to work out why a bunch of bilionaire bankers shouid stand behind gangs of communists, neohberals and rampant fascists The attraction of fascists for communists, and vice versa, 1s no mystery They appear to stand, or sit, at the far ends of a pohtical continuum but in fact the continuum is a circle not a line and fascism and communism sit closely together The term 'neoliberal' is, of course, merely an acceptable, madern replacement for the word 'communist' But why would billionaire bankers sit with neolkberals?

The explanation is a simple one
The bilhonaire bankers know that a world government will mean that some-

one has to look after all the finance, commerce and natural resources and take control of all the money And they, the bankers, will selflessly step forward to take control— with the neoliberals providing the front men and women for a to-tahtanan government which appears to rule the world but which merely serves as an admimstration for the puppet masters A world government will mean a world court, a world army, a world central bank with a single (digital) currency, a world tax system, a world welfare state, world economic planning, mandatory population control of some kind and with health and education organised on a global scale It will also mean that members of the pubhe will not be allowed

to own any weapons Think about 1t carefully and you will realise that some of these aspects of world government already exist and the rest are 1n preparation

A look at Part Three of this book will show you precisely how the bankers and financiers have, throughout the 20th and 21st century, already succeededin using politictans and organisations such as the United Nations to enable them to take control of many of the world's resources, much of the world's wealth and mndeed, whole countnes This part of the book 1s a timeline for the accumulation of oppression, deceit and egregious corporate and institutional behaviour The bilhonatres and bankers have for decades been investing billtons of dollars in their takeover and they have been using taxpayers' money, and the hard work of small farmers and workers everywhere, to help them take control They have used defence spending and foreign aid programmes to enable them to take more and more power, and they have financed somal unrest and the absurd climate change myth in order to introduce legislation which furthers ther ambitions and gives them ever more power over everyone and everything In a fair and decent world power should be shared among the people In the world which the globalists are preparing, all the power will be in the hands of a few, unelected greedy, self-centred mdividuals

I haven't filled this book with references because ta do so would add a month to the time taken to prepare the book for publication And there isn't time Time isrunming out Also, todo so would double the size and price of the book Readers who question or doubt any of my assertions can easily check them valdity by doing research of their own {remembening, of course, that the essence of good research is to know what questions ta ask and where to look to find honest answers - usually outside anything associated with mainstream media organ-isations, which have persistently and determinedly refused to print evidence which does not support the theories which are favoured by the conspirators)

It is vital to understand that there ts no evidence that man-made climate change 1s a dangerous threat, or even exists, and a considerable amount of evi-dence to show that changes 1n the weather are nothing more than the ordinary climactic changes which have occurred since man first started noticing and recording the weather The sometimes scary scenarios publicised by the climate change cultists (for whom the collective term should be 'enemies of manland') are nothing more than scaremongering propaganda produced by people who will never allow any debate or discussion about their prognostications It is Important to remernber that for some years now the conspirators, desperate to

create changes in the weather, have dumped mulhons of tons of potentially toxic sun-blocking nano-particulates such as alumina, barium and strontium above the earth in sometimes successful attempts to affect the weather, damage crops and cause mass starvation And as thetr efforts begin to work, they will demand more restrictions and more lockdowns and claim, inevitably, that these are nec

essary because of the changes in the weather which will by then have taken place

Remember everything! have reported in this book can he easily checked from reliable sources J have included a short bibliography at the end of this book to help you do your own research I own and have read all these books (and many more) in preparing this volume

2

The conspirators are winning (and they obviously are) because they have taken complete control of the maimstream media and much of the internet, They know that if you control what people tead, see and hear then youcan control what they think The mamstream media has always been fairly corrupt but m recent years the corruption has become absolute Broadcasting organisations such as the BBC and newspapers such as The New York Times now specialise im the dissemination of propaganda, misinformation and disinformation, rather than news

Propaganda used to be crude It used to consist of posters and slogans and it used to be promoted m a pretty obvious sort of way Simple, dramatic propaganda probably reached its apogee during the First World War when the Enghsh were taught that the Germans were eating babies In Germany posters everywhere simply read 'God Punish England’

But slowly, the psychologists and the brain washing experts took over and propaganda became infinitely more subtle and ever-present.

In 1957, Vance Packard wrote a book about advertising and he called 1t The Hidden Persuaders He explamed how advertising copywniters used psychological tricks to persuade us to buy the products they were selling. They sold soaps and deodorants by suggesting that if you didn’t use their product then, well, not even your best friends would tell you the unpleasant truth Copywriters used guuit, greed and envy to make consumers open their wallets and their purses and to spend more than they could afford on products they didn’t really need but had been tricked into beheving that they wanted or had to have

Today, most propaganda 1s unrecogmsable as such Crude threats of pestilence, war, famine and death have been replaced with subtler, created fears Occasionally atriptych phrase or an advertisement will stand out as rather obvious and clumsy but most of the time ideas and fears are promoted and 'sold’ in the

same Way as cars or cornflakes but are sold with a subtlety which makes it nigh on impossible for the casual observer to realise that they are being mampulated And, of course, that isn't surprising since the people behind the mampulation are well-qualified professionals, many of therm trained in war-time psychological techniques used to oppress and convince resistant ervilian populations

Propaganda isn't always what tt seems to be and even intelligent observers can sometimes find it difficult to work out precisely what the ultimate arm of a particular campaign might be Some propaganda material appears on official government advertisements, of course, but most of it appears in the traditional mainstream media As the pandemic fraud began in 2020, so shops and businesses began to stop buying advertising There was no point tn compames spending money on buying adverts when all the shops and most places of business were closed by the strict lockdowns that were mn force around the world (The key thing to remember ts that everything that happened at that tame happened in virtually every country in the world Never before had such strict and identical laws been introduced on a global scale) And so governments stepped m with huge advertisernents, bought every day at full price The big mainstream media companies (newspapers, magazines, radio and television) had never had things so good Internet companies also found that they were recerving huge amounts of advertising money from governments And, of course, in the UK the BBC had already been bought with the licence fee and the huge hand-outs of taxpayers' money which the corporation had become accustomed to receiving

(In addition, the BBC entered into a financial arrangement with a certam Bull

Gates, an amateur vaccine enthusiast and professional investor in vaccine companies, whose enthusiasm for hiring doctors and nurses to shick needles into strangers was and is unprecedented. It is difficult to think of a more disreputable organisation Gates, like Prince Andrew, was a close friend of Epstein and has financtal links with many media compantes including The Guardian which published a painfully obsequtous article about him The BBC has broadcast lies, denied truths, taken sides, when 1t 1s supposed to be impartial, supported the EU, from which it has received bucket loads of moncy, and broken at least one very significant promise -to provide free TV licences to those over 75)

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And to make sure that propaganda works most effectively, the people paying for the propaganda ensure that their messages remain free of opposition by using censorship ta control critics and those offering questions or alternative points of view

Propaganda and censorship are twin, synergistic weapons used to control public opinion and to promote the views (whatever they may be) of those paying for the propaganda and the censorship Opmions and facts which don't fit the conspirators' agenda are suppressed or cornpletely banned.

(It has recently been suggested, by a social psychologist, that students should be taught how to counter conspiracy theories and propaganda Such a scheme was introduced in Finnish schools in 2014 I would welcome such a scheme if

I had any faith that those teaching the curnculum were able to define ‘propaganda’ fairly and objectively Sadly, the evidence shows that the world 1s awash with dishonest, bought-and-paid-for fact checkers and ‘misinformation and disinformation’ units {such as the one run by the BBC) which merely promote and defend what the conspirators tell them to promote and defend)

The result of all the propaganda, 1s that most people still seem to think that the barrage of bad things happening are all happening now by accident or by comcidence That simply isn’t true Everything is happening on purpose; everything is orchestrated There ts a malign force manipulating our lives - a malign force controlled by the conspirators It is no accident that there is now an untreated global epidemuc of anxsety and depression with mental health problems now probably the commonest health disorder affecting chnldren It1s ternfying to see that in the UK well over eight million people are being actively treated with anti-depressant drugs (which, for the record, have been shown not to work)

Today, propaganda is used to manipulate and to control
All things considered it is perhaps not surprising that there are so many

strikes around the world, why violent nots are commonplace, why mflation is soaring, why health care is detertorating rapidly, why travel has become deeply unpleasant (when t's possible), why millions of children are uhiterate and imnumerate, why the police no longer bother investigating senous crimes and why corruption 1s now so commonplace that no one in authonty notices or cares

3

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While propaganda around the world has been spread by professional teams of misinformation specialists, debate and balanced discussion has been banned.

For years now itt has been illegal even to discuss the holocaust (which was, uniquely, dignified with an initial capital letter, in the sarne way that covid was subsequently given an initial capital letter or, in many cases, written out entirely in capital letters to make the word look even more important)

I don't question the holocaust | don’t pretend to know what happened or did not happen

What I do find tmmensely troubling 1s that experts who claim to have evidence, or substantiated views, can be sent to jail simply for wanting to debate the accepted truth

And this clampdown on debate is being extended
The marnstream media refuses to debate climate change, the covid pandemic

or the dangers of vaccination - among other things A very dangerous precedent has been set Governments want criticism of vaccination programmes to

be treated as terrorism. At least one US Presidential candidate for the 2024 elec tions has said that cntics of clumate change theory should be put in prison

Since the 1980s, the clyrmate change myth has been promoted with great certainty by the controlled mainstream media But nothing that has happened in the last century has been in any way abnormal, and for cultists and meteorologists to claim that they are able to warn with confidence of what the weather wil be hke mn 50 or a 100 years time is extraordinarily nonsensical, since weather forecasters have a job to predict what tomorrow's weather will be like with any degree of accuracy

The truth is that the majonty of climate change sctentists do not agree that man-made climate change 1s a problern and most of the hystertcal warnings which have appeared in the media have been based on computer simulations and are worthless

For a brref summary of the clymate change fraud |] recommend a small book entitled 'Greta's Homework', written by Zina Cohen Many of the most absurd scaremongers have been proved wrong time and time again So, for example, one leading expert (Dr Kenneth E.F Watt, an ecologist at the University of Cahforma, predicted that the world would be 11 degrees colder by the year 2000 and that we would be in an Ice Age }

There ts no scientific evidence supporting the politically motivated claim that climate change ts a real problem The climate change myth was created by the

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globalists who are desperately trying to create a threat which will move us towards a world government And sadly, now, most people don't question what they are told, Some are too frightened of what they might hear to ask questions, they don't want to know the answers and they don't want to have to confront the fact that they are ving in a world where the propagandists (such as the New York Times, the Washington Post and the BBC) have turmed black into white and white mto black Some symply do not beheve that they could have been hed to so consistently and so vehemently

The same is true of other scare stories which have been run in recent years Broadcasters, newspapers and respectable sounding pressure groups have all hed constantly and consistently about the ozone layer, acid rain, polluhion and infections

Huge amounts of money are bering made by the campargners and professional agitators who run the organisations and charities trying to 'sell' the myth of chmate change

As happened with AIDS in the latter part of the 20th century, anyone promot ing the offiaally approved party-Line will be swamped with grants and financial support

(I remember debating the isstte of AIDS on LBC radio in London Afterwards,

standing on the pavement outside the studio, | asked my ‘opponent’, a campaigner for a homosexual group, if he really believed the nonsense he had shared with the audience He readily admitted that he didn't, but that he had lied and produced fake figures simply to try to wm the argument He was, he said, concerned that if AIDS were considered to be a problem which only affected homosexuals then it would receive no public support or money)

On the other hand, anyone who questions the myth will be destroyed professionally Television performers who stick to the globalists’ hne about climate change are feted and offered vast sums of money while those who even dare to question the official lime suddenly become unfashionable and unemployable

Those who argue that man-made climate change ts a serious problem consistently refuse to debate their views in public As with the covid-19 vaccine, the refusal to debate ts good evidence of a fraud and a cover up

The result of all the lies is, I’m pleased to report, that the majority of people simply don’t beheve that clmmate change ts real Even after being bombarded with threats and fears, managed and controlled by governments, pressure

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groups and international borhes such as the United Nations, most people remain resolutely sceptical

4

The true story of the conspiracy taking us towards the Great Reset and the New Normal is a story of unprecedented wickedness

It 1s a story which has taken me years to unravel It 1s a story of deceit, cor ruption and of a small group of men and women with an unquenchable thirst for power and an unnatural appetite for wealth It 1s a shocking story which explains how a small group of relentless megalomaniacs have mantpulated bilhons of people around the world into believing a completely fabricated myth - the myth of man-made climate change - solely so that they can take complete control and create a new world government (Note the term ‘climate change’ 1s now frequently used together with the prefix ‘existential’ as though this gives this entirely unsubstantiated theory some gravitas.) It is a story of how well-meaning but native tndividuals have been tricked into believing carefully concocted hes about the environment, and then acting asf those hes were true Itis a story of financiers and bilhonares bribimg and pulling the strings of politicians and bureaucrats Itis a story of endless deceits It is a story of conspirators deliberately turning free men and women into slaves, unable to take responsibility for their own actions and totally dependent upon the State for everything they do It is a story of ruthless advocates for fake pandemics deliberately creating fear and panic and then offering some sort of solution This1s, in short, a story of the most hommfying, evil plot ever concocted by man and in this book I wall give you the evidence showing how this fraud has been carefully and del:berately manufactured

Throughout the world, governments have accepted the agenda force-fed to them by a cadre of neo-hberals Exactly the same economic mules are now apphed everywhere So-called reforms introduced by the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) the World Trade Organisation and the Federal Reserve, and the central banks under the auspices of the Bank of International Settlements tn Switzerland, and all sponsored by the Bretton Woods institutions have created a perfect environment for global banks and multmational corporations The label ‘neohberal’ nught imply a kindly, free market system but under the authonty of the neoliberals a new system has been created which gives authonty, power and pretty well nearly all the money to the bankers As both Plato and Aristotie

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recognised, wealth 1s addictrve The bankers behind the conspiracy to create a World Government can never have enough money They man:pulate, they he, they cheat, they defraud and they have no feeling for the people from whom they steal As long as they get another billton or two tnthe bank they don't care about the millions who die And they prefer to make their money without having to work for it

5

I should mention, in passtng, that the IMF and the World Bank and so on are regulatory bodies which were created to operate on behalf of the world's governments but m practice they operate on behalf of the world's biggest banks and corporations and work with secretive and unelected organisations such as the Trilateral Commmssion, the Bilderbergerzs, the Council on Foreign Relations the International Chamber of Commerce, the Trans-Atlantic Business Tnalogue, the United States Council for International Business, the Institute of International Finance and the World Economic Forum Itis the last of these, the WEF, with its annual meetings mn Davos, which ts perhaps the most dangerous (] wall explain how these organtsations work in Part II of this book) These organisations meet in secret with bankers and do so in closed sessions Most of their deliberations and conclusions are secret - even though the costs of thetr meetings, and the huge costs of the security provided may be met by taxpayers

6

You have been subjected to a barrage of les for much i not all of your hfe You have been the victirn of a confidence trick of brobdingnagian proportions, a deceit that even the Baron Munchausen would probably find too unhkely

And yet, as I have promised, everything I’m about to tell you is true In Part Three of this book I have named names and places and I've given dates in order to explain precisely how, when, where and why this fraud has been systematically concocted The globalists describe anyone who questions what is happening as a ‘conspiracy theorist’ but when you've read Part Three, you will realise that this conspiracy is no theory

The bottom lime, the unavordable, unpleasant truth, is that everything 1s far worse than you thought 1t was The world is not being deranged by accidents, it is not being deraled by coincidences Everything that 1s happening has been carefully planned, everything 1s deliberate We are victims, you and I, of the

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biggest, longest and most comprehensive conspiracy in history Slowly, me thodically and ruthlessly, a relatively small group of conspirators have steadily taken control of every major institution in the world They have bulhed world leaders, they have replaced kings and presidents with their own men and they have stolen and deceived in a way that the Cosa Nostra would surely envy The conspirators are for the most part Amencan and phrases such as ‘US exception-alism’ and the ‘reserve currency dollar’ mean that the United States can ignore international law, tell other countries what to do, invade sovereign states with impunity, wage wars at someone else's expense, build up massive, international debts which they never intend to pay off, steal natural resources (such as oil, gold and minerals) without compensation or apology and force countnes to hand over assets and local monopohes to multinational companies in America

All around the world billions of people have been threatened, impoverished, bullied and puntshed tn order to enrich American banks, American financiers and American corporations In many cases where Americans have invaded and stolen resources they have left behind chaos and abject poverty Look, for ex-ample, at what happened to Iraq, Libya and Syma to give but three modern examples

And the final irony ts that despite the fact that it has pillaged and raped whole continents, the United States is now by far the world’s largest debtor It has suc-cessfully turned the dollar into a way to make other countries finance tts global war mongering The foreign reserves of central banks around the world consist of dollar dominated assets and only now (in 2023) are countries such as China, India and South Africa demanding new principles for international law, trade and finance

(Itis curious, by the way, that rmllions who beheve in the existence of the Cosa Nostra find 1t impossible to believe that well-educated men and women from good famrhes could possrbly be mvolved in an even bigger scheme to control the world’s population The members of the Cosa Nostra, the Triad and simular or-ganisations are content with running drugs and prostitutes, and to protect their enterprises they steal, maim and kill hundreds of people The conspirators, the bankers and financiers, and their allies (whom I classify as the collaborators) want control of everything and everyone and to protect their ambitions they steal, maim and kall hundreds of mllrons)

And both conspirators and collaborators have acquired a robust sense of entitlernent

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A medium level bureaucrat worlang for the Government im India accidentally dropped his smart phone into a reservar So he had the reservoir drained, with millions of gallons of water being wasted, so that he could look for his phone

Every where tn the world, on an hourly basts, entitled bureaucrats abuse their power tn a thousand different ways

7

The wickedness, the lmnutless greed, the hypocnsy, the blatant cruelty, the ruthlessness and the depravity of American politicians, bankers and billionaire financiers is hard to believe

For over a century ruthless men and women, some of them well-known, some

of them the holders or former holders of public office, some of them secretive and anonymous and some of them freelance power brokers who have moved effortlessly from the world of finance to the world of government and back again So, for example, numerous executives have moved between banks such as Galdman Sachs on the one side, and governments and the most powerful NGOs (such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund) on the other

Rents, interest and huge financial charges (ancluding massive bonuses paid to bankers whether or not they have done their jobs well) are, bizarrely, counted as 'financial services' and listed in a nation's accounts as part of the country's Gross Domestic Product

(Financial services should really be regarded as debts and countnes, such as the United Kingdom, where financial services make up a major part of the nation's GDP must inevitably be doomed In those countnes, real productivity (making things and providing genutne services) have become secondary to the provision of lending money and the fees and charges associated with mon-eylending)

Anyone who questtons the role of the banks 1s, mevitably, described as a 'con-spiracy theomst' and as 'discredited' Those terms appear time and time again, so often that it is clear that they are designed and spread by specialists working for agencies such as the CIA And the abuse is decorated with decades old startes which can be rewritten to produce doubt, by mampulated truths, by half-truths and by downright hes Anyone who questions governments and bankers will be labelled a conspiracy theorist and called discredited by a fake encyclopaedia called Wikipedia which appears to be controlled by the CIA and simular organtsa-tions from other countmes

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(Larry Sanger, the despairing co-founder of the site Wilapedia, has used the word 'corrupt' to describe his creation A deal between Wilapedia and Google means that the lres put on Wikipedia are reproduced on Google to reach a larger audience)

The hes help to prevent anyone exposing the conspiracy from reaching more people The conspirators and the collaborators who work for and with them are specialists in psychological warfare and in the basic elements of 'controlled Opposition

The key thing to remetnber 1s that there are now no coincidences in geopolitics or modern history and nothing 1s happening by accident However chaotic and unpredictable and out of control you feel things are, you should understand that everything that has happened 1n the last few decades (and particularly in the last three years) was planned It was, indeed, planned so carefully and with such precision that for the last three years in particular, since early 2020, tt has been possible to forecast what will come next (I have predicted almost everything that happened since early 2020 and the evidence for that 1s available on my websites)

I naturally hope that as many people as possible will read the evidence I've collected and will tgnore the attempts by the conspirators and the collaborators to discredit me and the book Sadly, most ofthe people who should read this book won't touch it, they won't read tt because they have been brainwashed by the maimstream media working for the conspirators

I have been thoroughly discredited and demonised by the establishment, and the fact that for over 50 years I have produced accurate predictions and analyses has been suppressed and ignored The very fact that this book will not be available in bookshops or public libraries, and will not be reviewed, or even mentioned mm the mainstream media, tells us much My books have been published by many leading hardback and paperback publishers and have been transiated into 26 languages and sold around the world But, as with my other books on this subject, I will have to publish this book myself because no orthodox mainstream publisher will dare publish it In the past most of my books were senahsed m newspapers and magazines Several of them were turned into senes for television and radio This book will not appear anywhere else Like everyone else telling the truth Iam led about, sneered at and ndiculed by agents working for

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the conspirators I no longer care that saying this makes me sound paranoid be cause | know that Iam not

The conspirators were never gomng to take any chances They knew that once they had begun their campaign towards the Great Reset (formerly known as the Great Merger) their propaganda campaign would be opposed by people who could see through the les and the misinformation

And so, nght from the start, they knew that they would have to stamp down hard on anyone (especially doctors or media professionals) who dared to question the official line Anyone who didn’t agree wholeheartedly with the idea of the Great Reset was demonised as a right wing extremist and immediately discredited

Branches of the military and the secret services were employed to attack and discredit the truth-tellers In the United States of America the CIA has been extremely active tn this area. And the FBI has worked with Ukraimian intelligence to censor and suppress Americans on social media (tn breach of their first amendment rights) In the UK, much of the work of disinformation, misinfor-

mation and demonization and abuse has been m the hands of the Bntish Army's 77th Bngade For example, right from the start the 77th Bngade put abusive and libellous remarks in the comments section underneath videos questioning the official line on the pandemic The abuse was often crude My videos were constantly full of libellous comments claiming that I did not have a medical degree, that I was a fake anda fraud And GCHQ (the UK Government's spy centre and eavesdropping agency) was ordered 'to wage cyber war on anti-vaccine propaganda' and 'to take out anti-vaxxers online and on social media' GCHQ, paid for by British taxpayers, has used dirty trick tactics to control, infiltrate, manipulate and distort online information GCHQ's own Twitter account claims that their 'brightest people brmg together intelligence and technology to keep Britain safe' but in May 2021, the European Court of Human Rights ruled that GCHOQ's methods violated the nght to privacy and that its regime for the collection of data was unlawful Who at GCHQ decided that the agency had the mght to suppress the truth and to promote lies 1s still a mystery The end result of this treachery has been that thousands of people have been killed or injured because they were denied information about the covid 19 'vaccine' which might have helped save them from listenme to inaccurate information on the BBC and other areas of the mainstream media

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A shghtly more subtle approach was to hire individuals to pretend to be on the side of the truth-tellers | suspect that at least half of those claimmng to be 'truth-tellers were actually working for the opposition Some have ridiculously complex organisations and they have often been hugely successful at collecting money {Some have collected millions of pounds from gullible supporters and, 1n some cases, big fees from drug companies) And there were others who regarded the pandemic as a career booster and were pliable enough to be allowed onto mainstream television and radio stations where what they said could be directed or manipulated (The real truth-tellers were not allowed access to any mainstream media.)

There 1s nothing new m any of this, of course The authonties have always infiltrated pressure groups or those who threaten to cause disruption

I have always been very active in the campaign against animal experimentation and back tn the 1970s and 1980s anti-vivisection campaigns were regarded as the major terrorism threat in the UK The security services, MI5 and Special Branch, admitted that the absence of outside, traditional terrorists meant that

in order to justify their existence they had to find some alternative and ant vivisection groups were selected as the most suitable target This sometimes had bizarre consequences On one occasion a group of five alleged extremists was arrested Unfortunately, it was quickly found that four of the alleged extremists were actually representatives of various official groups One was a member of Spectral Branch, one was an MI5 officer, one was a pohceman and one was an undercover journalist Only one member of the group was a bona fide animal rights activist Initially, the actimst was charged with the very serious offence of conspiracy but the case quickly fell apart, and was abandoned, when the prosecutors realised that a conspiracy requires two or more tndividuals - you cannot

change a solitary individual with conspiracy This was not an isolated instance It was common place to find that groups protesting or campaigning agamst animal experrmentation had been infiltrated by those promoting or supporting vivisection - though the majority of the infiltrators were being paid, either by the Government or by the drug industry

Much the sarne thing is happening today among those telling the truth about the banks, climate change, fake pandemics and toxic 'vaccines'

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There 1s much bewilderment among mtelligent doctors and scientists as to why so many doctors kept quiet about the hes being told when the covid-19 hoax and the fake pandemic unfolded Around the world, hundreds of thousands of doctors kept quiet about the covid-19 'vaccine' and continued to prescribe a product which has been accurately described as the most dangerous and damaging sin gle pharmaceutical product ever marketed The covid 19 jab did not do what the establishment promised it would do but, at the same tame, 1t caused countless thousands of deaths and serious injuries among the patients who were injected

There are two explanations for the fact that so many doctors ignored the evidence and did what they were told to do by dishonest advisors within the medical establishment and bought and pard for journahsts and celebrities

The first explanation 1s that all over the world doctors were extraordmaniy well paid to give the covid 19 jabs Hospitals were given bmbes (labeiled as bonuses) which were dependent upon the number of patients they injected Doctors were bought off, and dissuaded from asking too many questions, by being patd well over the normal fees for piving vaccinations Those doctors wall, in due course, appear in court where they will be unabie to mount any sort of defence To say that they behaved unprofessionally and greedily 1s a massive understatement

The second explanation 1s that doctors were too terrified to speak out against the medical establishment because they saw what had happened to colleagues who dared to share their views with then colleagues and the general public and who had had the:r licences removed by the official heensing authonties and, in addition, been vilified by the media

The truth, so well hidden during the last three years, 1s that the medical establishment was, as it has been for decades, controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and instead of looking at the facts ucensing authorities around the world merely did as they were told to do Numerous doctors lost ther licences, and thei hvelshoods, because they dared to speakoutandtelithetruth The majonty of doctors, seeing what had happened to those who spoke out, kept quiet and betrayed their patients, themselves and their profession Those gutless wimps should be ashamed

In the United Kingdom, doctors are licensed by the General Medical Counal,

an organisation which ts, in theory at least, a chanty but which appears to have some of the worst qualities of a quango, a government department and an en forcer for the drug industry I believe that drug companies control governments,

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they control the medical establishment and, it appears, they may also control the UK's medical licensing authonty-— the General Medical Council

The GMC has become infamous for its extraordinarily one-sided defence of the exaggerated covid pandemic and the potntless but enormously dangerous covid vaccine

When the fake pandemic was first promoted in February and March 2020, | ummediately described the covid scare ahoax The figures available proved without any question that the danger of what was clearly merely a rebranded annual flu had been massively exaggerated by people who had a bad track record at assessing the relevant figures In the UK, the Government’s own official advisors agreed with me, dismissing the covid 19 infection as being no more dangerous than the annual flu Inevitably perhaps, their expert advice appears to have been ignored in favour of advice from a mathematician with a termble track record.

Naturally, the conspirators behind the exaggerated risk did not like my description of the covid scare as a hoax (a video I made was seen by many millions within days) and I was quickly demontsed and Led about in the media The GMC couldn’t take away my licence because their own admunistrative rules meant that, as with many doctors, my retirement from active practise meant that I'd had to give up my licence But younger doctors, who were convinced by my arguments or who reached the same conclusions, were to feel the full wrath of the drug company controlled medical establishment

So, for example, consider the case of Dry Mohammad Adil who, until three years ago was a respected surgeon working inthe NHS Three years ago, Dr Adil criticised the Government line on covid, and the GMC responded by taking away his lrcence - meaning that he could no longer practise as a surgeon or, as a doctor in any capacity Three years later, Dr Adil still didn’t have his licence back The cost to him has been extraordinary And we should not forget the cost to the NHS If we consider that im those three years he could have performed 1,000 operations a year — not an unltkely number-then his three year banishment means that 3,000 patients have been denied the operations they needed

Several other doctors in the UK had their licences removed for criticising the absurd and indefensible covid policy And exactly the same thing happened around the world where hcensing authonties have :gnored the scientific evidence and punished doctors who dared to share the truth with the world - usually on socral medza,

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It was this unscientific bullying, and the widespread publicity given to the consequences, which ensured that thousands of doctors kept quiet - fnghtened that they too would lose their hcences and ther livelihoods A doctor without a licence to practice is as useless as a sweep without his brushes or a tax: driver without a cab

The GMC's decision to deny Dr Adil his licence was always unjustifiable First, there ts the question of free speech Article 19 of the United Nations

Charter states clearly that ‘everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression’ There 1s no codicil limiting the rights of doctors The GMC's decision iS in direct opposition to this fundamental human mght It has been argued that doctors have a special responstrbility because of their position and traming but this strengthens rather than weakens the UN charter Doctors have a special responsibility to speak out when they believe that something 1s wrong. And, of course, you can't have a little bit of free speech any more than a woman can be a bit pregnant You either have free speech or you don't. To say that a doctor cannot eriticise the medical establishment ts as nonsensical as saying that an opposition party politician cannot criticise the Government The hcensing authorties which have removed doctors’ licences for speaking out are undemably in breach of the UN Charter How a lawyer or a judge can justify allowing any heensing body to deny an individual's right to protection from the UN Charter 1s, Iconfess,a mystery tare Doctors are entitled to share their views with the public and the public is entitled to decide whom to believe

Right from the start the doctors supporting the Government and drug companies have steadfastly refused to debate in public, and the mainstream media has taken an entirely biased, unbalanced one-sided line in reporting the fake pandemic The BBC, ignoring its own charter and repeated claims of fairness, has even stated that they would not interview anyone questioning the value of vaccination whether they were ‘nght or wrong’ I have frequently challenged vaccine supporters to a hve, nahional public debate None has had the confidence or the courage to accept the challenge

(The conspirators and the collaborators have not just refused to debate the pros and cons of the covid vaccine They have refused to debate any of the contentious issues You mught think that the most confident consprrators and collaborators would be delighted to have the opportunity to debate their belrefs about climate change, the Great Reset and their plans for a world government, and to air the details of the science which they claim is behind their new re-

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ligion But they don’t want to debate and the only logical conclusion 1s that they know that they would lose any debates because they have no supporting evidence)

Second, the GMC has assumed that the Government and the medical establishment must always be correct and beyond criticism. This 1s dangerous nonsense One doesn’t have to go very far back in history to find numerous examples of times when the Government and the medical establishment have been

completely wrong and, as a result, patients have suffered until doctors had the courage to stand up for the truth When Dr John Snow gave chloroform ta Queen Victoria, there was an uproar in the medical establishment because it was felt that women should not be given anaesthesia dunng childbirth Electroconvulsive therapy, leucotomies and the removal of vast lengths of the intestine were all approved by the medical establishment but later condemned It was because of the medical establishment that tonsils were removed without good reason No one knows how many children died as a result A good deal of unnecessary heart surgery has been performed on patients because of bad medical practices promoted by the medical establishment. It was because of bad medical practices condoned or encouraged by the medical establishment that milhons of patients became hooked on barbiturates and then benzodiazepines And I wonder how many of those who have condemned Dr Adil know that widely used and previously approved vaccination programmes have been condemned as worthless and dangerous

History shows that the medical establishment has been wrong more often than it has been nght, andif the GMC stops doctors cnticising the Government and the medical establishment (known to be linked to the pharmaceutical industry) then nothing will ever change for the better

If we go back a httle further in medical story we come across individuals such as Dr Semmelwetss whose work on women lying m labour wards changed medical practice and saved thousands if not mullions of hves Dr Semmelweiss was, of course, viciously attacked by the medical establishment There are many more examples tn my book 'Medical Heretics’

The undeniable truth ts that history shows that the medical establishment has always suppressed the truth and promoted profitable lies Nothing has changed The medical establishment stzll promotes medical procedures which don’t work, while suppressing essential but inconvement truths The GMC’s fun

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damental mistake appears to me to be that 1t has assumed that its loyalty should be to the medical establishment rather than to the welfare of patients

Third, and more directly perhaps, the evidence now shows quite clearly that the medical establishment's official line on covid-19 was completely false Everything that the establishment has said and done has been wrong and dan gerous The General Medical Council and all those who supported its decisions seemed to have assumed that the establishment was nght

Ifthey had looked closely at the evidence they would have known that the UK Government's own scientific advisers decided, back in March 2020 that covid was not a major threat They would have known that Government statistics show that the number of people who died from covid-19 was no greater than the number who die from flu every year {a disease which had mystenously and conveniently disappeared) Indeed, the number of deaths from what was clearly a rebranded flu was no greater in 2020 and 2021 than it was in some previous years Moreover, it is now clear that the absurd policies of lockdowns, social dis-

tancing and mask wearimg were without any scientific foundation, were unnec essary and dangerous and were in part responsible for the entirely predictable mcrease 1n deaths which marked 2022 and will continue for some years to come The PCR test was never intended to be used as it was, and has been proven, beyond any doubt, to be of no more value than a coin toss It 1s clear that the closing down of schools and businesses was also entirely unnecessary and has done massive, long-lasting damage Worse stull, it is now abundantly clear, and generally accepted by intelligent, well-informed doctors and scientists, that the covid 19 vaccine was never properly tested, was never fit for purpose and is the most dangerous and deadly pharmaceutical product ever marketed Largely because of links with the pharmaceutical companies involved, the Government and the medical estabhshment misled the public and the health professions All the evidence for these claims ts avatlable on my website and books and in over 300 videos | made between the years 2020 and 2023 (The videos first appeared on YouTube but they were removed piecerneal pretty well as soon as they ap- peared And then my entire channel was removed for the new crime of telling truth)

Finally, there is one other rather shocking reason why the GMC should not have made any rulings about Dr Adil or any other doctors who cnticised the offi- ciallineoncovid 19 andthe covid-19 vaccine

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The General Medical Council {in my view one of two big enemies of patients in the UK - the other 1s the Bntish Medical Association) has invested nearly £1,000,000 in fast food and drink firms and, worse still, has invested large amounts of money from doctors’ fees indrug companies And one of the compa- nzesin which rt had shares was one of the compantes making a covid-19 vaccine

How can the GMC judge doctors’ behaviour in relation to covid and covid jabs when it has a vested interest in the financial success of vaccine manufacturers such as Astra Zeneca?

It could surely be argued that the GMC, which has money invested in vaccine manufacture, has a vested interest in protecting vaccine making and should not, therefore, discrpline doctors whose actions might have damaged the earning po tential of any compamies rn which it has investedits own money

The GMC can be compared to a judge punishing someone for cnticising a product in which he himself has a financial interest Indeed, I would argue that the GMC, and its vast army of overpaid, and, it seems to me, sometimes arrogant, pen pushers has abandoned tts role as a guardian of the public and become an enforcer for the pharmaceutical industry

Those who had the courage to speak out should be applauded and it is they, not the promoters ofa 'vaccine’ that does not do what it was promised to do but which has caused many deaths and much illness, who should be honoured

In a free and progressive society criticism of the establishment should never be subject to censorship

My conclusion can only be that the General Medical Council 1s unfit for purpose and should be closed down immediately It 1s not fit to hand out dog licences, and certainly not equipped to control the licensing of doctors It has failed to doits job to protect the public and it appears to me to have acted more in the interests of the pharmaceutical industry than the interests of patients

I'm dehghted to report that m July 2023, the British Medical Association agreed with my conclusion The BM4é's Annual Representative Meeting has passed a no confidence vote for the GMC and will now call for its leaders to be sacked

The BMA motion said that 'too many' Medical Practitioners Tribunal Services fitness to practise decisions are 'disproportionate to the error of the doctors mis-take' and expressed no confidence in the current tnbunal

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Doctors voted for a motion calling for the leadership team of the GMC to be dismissed and replaced with a team that 'commands the confidence and support of the medical profession

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It is a sad fact that most people are so indoctrinated that they have no interest In reading anything which may force them to question what ther government {and government sponsored media) has told them to think

The mainstream media has, of course, distracted millions with non-stortes about celebrities, minor celebrities and members of the English royal family The world ts in a spiral of deliberately engineered destruction, and with a designer war between NATO and Russia now well into a second year, it 1s well into World War III, but the mainstream media has pushed the war (and other ternble things which are happentng) onto page seven or the end of the news For the period of the war to date, it has concentrated its energies on the childish exhibitionism of a middle aged couple of former royals who seem to spend much of their lives making public announcements about their desperate desire to be private

Despite this determined suppression of reality, there is still more than enough scary news around to keep people fearful Recent large surveys have shown that most people now avord all the news because they find it too depressing They see no point in knowing about things which they feel they can do nothing about

Meanwhile, individual governmental and mternational bodies use every small hazard as a reason to introduce new, comprehenstve and suffocating legis-lation A decade or two ago I suspected that this was no more than bureaucrats doing the only thing they know how to do - micromanage - but itis much more than that The bureaucrats and rule makers have been encouraged to do every-thing they can to suppress the people

Around the world, laws are being mtroduced to make it illegal to share information which 1s regarded by the Government as 'misinformation' or disin-formation even though the news they share might be regarded by a majority of

doctors and scientists as accurate In Australia, for example, there 1s the Communications Legislation Amendment (Combatting Mis-information and Dis-information) Bill 2023 which will result in truth-tellers being fined up to $500,000

There ts no doubt that today a great many people are fnghtened to view the truth (or even something which they fear may be the truth) because the les they have accepted have resulted in their doing things for which they would

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feel ashamed So, forexample doctors and journalists who helped promote the wicked and fake covid fraud do not like to acknowledge the part they played m the creation of a false global pamic Nor do they like to see the evidence showing that the covid-19 ‘vaccine’ which they recommended with such enthusiasm has caused many thousands of deaths and serious life changing injuries

Even if you know some of the truth this book will shock you And it will perhaps surprise you to discover that the villains in the world are not the people whom we have been taught to see as villains (Putin, Xi, Gaddafi, etc)

Our freedorn is being taken from us at an tncredible speed by people who appear to be respectable and part of the establishment The ground work for the removal of our freedom was done decades ago Now we are in the final stages of the takeover It may sound msane but a small group of committed, self-serving extremists now dominate the political systems in all major Western countries and they control the global economy Itis because of this power and money hungry clique that we are controlled from birth until death by unseen hands And the control ts tightening by the day The conspirators are introducing a digital world and a digital currency There will soon be a global government, controlled by unelected but appointed individuals who, in turn, control our every move through the invidious system of social credit, a restrictive system which I described in some detail tn my book Socral Credit Nightmare on Your Street

The fnghtening thing about social credit, asly, manipulative programme of control, 1s the way in whichit 1s being introduced insidiously — without many people really noticing what is happening For exarnple, in England, the tax authorittes will, in 2026, be introducing a new points system for those who pay their tax late If a taxpayer collects a set number of pomts they will receive a financial penalty On the roads, motorists have been told that 2f they bump into a cychst they may be sent to prison for life (Knocking over a pedestrian ts fine, it seems, but cyclists must be protected.) And in school, children are being forced into a social credit systern which even the Chinese might find horrifying. At a school tn Devon, some pupils have been told that they cannot attend their school prom if they haven't accumulated enough ‘praise points’ Pupils get ‘praise points’ in five categones being ready to learn, enabling others to learn, treating the envronment and others with respect, working to the best of ther abrhty and fulfilling thetr responsibilities ‘Praise points’ are apparently awarded by staff as a reward

for ‘positive behaviour’ One parent said. ‘This has caused emotional harm and it is not kind and inclusive to these children banned from the prom’

Of course it tsn’t But I dont think anyone ever claimed that social credit schemes were designed to be kind and tnclusive

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The conspirators are ruthless and heartless m a way which most of us find difficult to comprehend They control everything we do They control banking and transportation and health care and they already own or control most of the world’s natural resources They start wars, when wars suit their purposes (regardless of the death and destruction those wars will cause), they create hatred between black and white and between men and women and they push economies into recessions and depressions when to do so serves their purpose The conspirators, who usually like to describe themselves as (and to be described as) ‘philanthropists’ deltberately introduce policies which they know will kill hundreds of milltons of people, even billions of people, because they know that those policies will make them more powerful and ever ncher (The myth of philanthropy is commonplace among bilhonaires John D Rockefeller Sr used to arrange for himself to be photographed giving dimes to children This was the basis for his reputation as a philanthropist)

The conspirators know that in order to continue to succeed they must convince the public that thereis no conspiracy And to do this it ts vital, utterly vital, to suppress the truth and oppress anyone who dares to tell the truth The mainstream media, bought and paid for, has enabled the conspirators to do this very effectively Early in 2020 I began making videos for YouTube I acquired a huge number of 'subseribers’ within a couple of months and then my channel was entirely deleted and 1 was banned from making more videos or even accessing the channel My crime was a simple but modern one telling the truth Facebook told me that 1 could not join their piatform because I would be a danger to their community (There was no discussion and no specific reason was given) 1 was banned by all social media sites (though fake sites tn my name appeared) and publishers suddenly refused to publish my work Publishers around the world withdrew my books from sale - even when those books had been hugely successful For example, publishers in Chia and Germany pulled all my books from sale because I had questioned the efficacy and safety of vaccination programmes There was no debate, no discussion, publishers didn’t ask me for evidence ~ my

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books were banished, to be pulped or burnt Newspaper editors who had been enthusiastic about articles they wanted me to wnte suddenly stopped talking to me and wouldn't even say what had happened

Censorship has long been a problem for authors, of course Animal Farm by George Orwell was refused by anumber of the publishers who saw tt. One admitted that the Minustry of Information in London had advised him agamst pubhishIngit

And those doing the banning usually find some strange ways to excuse their actions In June 2023, the European Union banned the publication of information which it thought did not support Ukraine with enough enthusiasm or which was regarded as supporting Russia in some way Reporters who tned to put both sides of the story, and who attempted to tell the truth, were punished orfired The EU claimed that it was controlling the flow of independent information and doing this to protect freedom of speech

Journalists and commentators working for mainstream publishers are very well paid toignore facts which might be inconvenient In the US 1t has for some time been well known that the New York Times and the Washington Post are no longer fighting to publish independent truths, both seem too inchned to support the conspirators and the establishment An American software billionaire, Bill Gates, a well-known lay proponent of the covid-19 vaccine, has given huge sums of money to The Guardian and to the BBC tn England The Guardian, for example, was given £12 mullion by Gates The BBC, which had also rece:ved money from the European Union, had close financial links with the vaccine supporting billonatre Both The Guardian and the BBC produced hagiographic profiles describing Gates as a philanthropist, Curiously, both organisations seemed subsequently to ignore Gates' links to Jeffrey Epstein, the disgraced financier Other individuals, including an English prince anda leading bank executive, have been ruined by their connectron to Epstein but, to the surpnse of some, Gates remains relatively untouched

As I have previously pointed out, at the height of the covid-19 fraud in 2020, one BBC presenter announced that the BBC would not debate the subject of vaccination with anyone critictsing the vaccine 'whether they were nght or wrong' Such blatant prejudice is difficult to believe, particularly when offered by a State broadcaster which has a duty to provide a fair and honest assessment of the news The only good thing you can say about the BBC staff is that they le and promote propaganda with a straight face When they repeatedly insist that two

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plus two equals five they do so with such solemnity that the mass of people belteve them, and doubt their previous suspicion that two plus two comes to something else, a sum which they can no longer quite remember The BBC has betrayed the licence fee payers, and obeyed the demands of its own left leaning liberal staff, promoting misinformation and disinformation with enthusiasm Durning the fake pandemic in 2020, the BBC held meetings with the Bntish Gov ernment and one can only assume that these meetings were to decide what hes to broadcast and what truths to suppress

The art of spreading misinformation and disinformation successfully depends upon the victirn betng prepared to believe what he or she ts told Repetihon of the mmsimformatron 1s vital and 1t helps 1f those spreading the hes are regarded asreliable and honest Over the years the BBC had built up a reputation as a respectable and honourable source of news but happily that reputation is now in tatters and surveys show that only a minonty believe anything on BBC news programmes

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The pattern I have discovered, the map I've drawn, will not only explain what has already happened (not just in the last few years but going back longer than anyone alive can remember) but tt will also enable you to see what we can expect inthe future We do not ordinarily see these things becausethey are hidden from us, they are disguised when they are not suppressed Even when coincidences are pornted out to us we do not see them as connected because the hes are simply too great for us to comprehend ('no one could possibly do that', we say to ourselves) and the malefactors, the conspirators, too evil for us to understand The conspirators who have driven the conspiracy forwards are not just bad men and women tn the way we understand the word 'bad' We tend to think of serial killers as evil but the evil of the globaltsts 1s far beyond anything most of us can comprehend. Obama, the Clintons, Blaw, the Rothschilds, the Rockefeilers et al are just as irredeemably evil as Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, Stalin and other psychopaths Their cold-blooded manzrpulations are designed to destroy everything we hold dear and everything we respect as human They live to manipulate by dece:rt The consprrators are different to the rest of us

Most people want to have some control of their own lives, they want a relationship, a home, some belongings and a position m their community They want to do what they can to help others.

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The consptrators are quite different they want power over other people and they have an msatiable yearning for wealth The conspirators' actions are driven by how they see their role in the world (not by any desire to help the world) American bankers see US hegemony and the dollar's posttion as the world's reserve currency as vital to their own wealth and so they will do everything to protect these things They want a global government controlled by America They want to create comphance, and slavery, through social credit They use war to reduce a population which they regard as too large

And who needs all those people when robots and artificial intelligence programmes can replace many of them? In spring 2023, two British telephone companies warned of massive redundancies with Vodafone announcing that it was sacking 11% of 1ts workforce and British Telecom expecting to sack 42% of its work force Most of those made redundant will never work again and their skills will be allowed to wither Supermarkets are sacking staff members and replacing them with automated tills Soon the shelves will be stocked by robots Banks are closing branches and pushing their customers to do all theur banking online

One of the aims of Artificial Intellhgence programmes ts to make demoted humans feel worthless, mnsignificant and powerless The mampulators are using the myth of climate change to create naive followers who do their work for them in destroying ordinary society

14
Through a potent, toxic mixture of greed and selfishness, the neoliberals are dehiberately destroying mankind in order to ennch and empower themselves (The neoliberals really came into power with Bill Clinton's Democratic Party m the US

and with Tony Blair's Labour Party in the UK.)

If they succeed with their plans for the Great Reset, everything we are and care about will dre, not inevitably, as the stars are dying, but murdered by the evil few (far, far fewer than nought poimt one per-cent of the population), and their complacent, complaisant collaborators wha do everything they are told to do to oppress and suppress and who probably make up between one and five per cent of the population

I suspect that many of the collaborators, confused tgnorant, unmmnformed unmmapinative, greedy, obedient and paid well beyond they natural skills, do believe what they are told, they belreve that the world ts threatened by man-made global warming and that there really was a dangerous epidernic in 2020

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Back in 2020, I warned that the collaborators would be our nemesis I| still stand by that Our main threat has always come not from the conspirators them selves, who are such a tiny number that they could not possibly have great tnfluence over the world's billions, but from the politicians, doctors, central bankers, journahsts, NGO officials and celebrities who defended the conspirator's theo ries and who promoted thei wicked schemes, the lockdowns, the vaccmes and ther endless hes

Electors every where keep putting their faith in political parties and 1n politicians They vote for different parties in the everlasting hope that they will one day be served by an honest government, It has been said that one sign of lunacy is to keep doing the same thing in the hope that the outcome will be different Every new government, everywhere in the world, promises much but dehvers nothing All political parties now make the same false promises and then ignore the will of the people who voted forthem Back 1n 1968, George Wallace potnted out that there wasn't 'a dime worth of difference between the two parties' tn America. When voting 1s fiddled {as tt is now 1n so-called developed countries,

Just as much as it 1s in undeveloped countries) it is not with the aim of putting a particular party nto power but with the aim of establishing those individuals who are most readily controlled by the conspirators

In what was perhaps a weak moment of honesty, President Franklin D Roosevelt, who was President of the United States between 1933 and 1945 (making him the longest serving President in American history) gave us a vital warming but I don't think anyone took him seriously and most people didn't listen He said 'In politics, nothing happens by accident Ifit happens, you can bet it was planned that way

The fact1s that things don't keep getting worse by accident, they keep getting worse by design

Hopes and ambitions don't fade by chance, and itis no comeidence that everything seems to go wrong in every country in the world at the same time

And anyone who draws attention to the evidence supporting these conclusions 1s regarded as deranged and ts immediately discredited, abused and demonised Professtonals, experts mn their field, who speak out against authority, are ostractsed and usually dismissed as ‘ight wing extremists’

You wil have no doubt noticed that officially there are no left wing extremists but that everyone who questions what governments do will automatically be la belled a ‘right wing extremist’ or, worse still, labelled as a 'terrorist’ or a ‘fascist’

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or both In practice, of course, nght wing politicians have been moving steadily to the left for many years and today most leading politicians in the West are best desertbed as neo-liberal Stnce there 1s absolutely no :dealogtcal or technical difference between politicians on the very far left, known as commumists, and politicians on the very far right, known as fascists, the neoliberals can them selves be accurately descnbed either as international socialists, which 1s to say ‘communists’ or as ‘national socialists’, which is to say ‘fascists’ or ‘neo-Nazts’, according to how you feel

In reality, the political spectrum should have totalitarrantsm at one end and anarchy at the other All modern political parties are, however, best described as totalitarian in method and intent since their arm 1s to take total control over aspect of ourlives There 1s no difference between communism as defined by Marx, total control as defined by the Illuminati in the 18th century and the Great Reset (the New Normal) as proposed by the World Economie Forum, the United Nations and all main political parties around the world

When pohticians, bankers and billionaires around the world all get together todo the same things mm order to take control of the world’s population, what else can you possibly call it other than a ‘conspiracy’?

(Those who are puzzled by what is happening, ask why well-known billionaire financiers could possibly advocate communism The answer, of course, 1s that under the sort of communism practised in the USSR and China, the people at the top of the pile lived very different bves to the ves endured by the masses at the bottom of the prle Today’s billionaires may publicly advocate a very left wing brand of socialism but in fact they manage to protect their wealth and to avoid paying taxes by having their money, their super yachts, their private islands, and their mansions in the middle of huge acreages, carefully protected 1n trusts and foundations Socialism and communism are promoted because they are the most efficient way to control the wealth and activites of the ordinary citizens Communism may be promoted as a way to give power to the people but in practice the plan 1s to transfer all power to a bunch of greedy megalomaniacs)

Eventually even those who want to speak out are frightened to do so because they see what happens to their colleagues And the ignorant, half-blind collaborators who have done the demomising and the sneering find that they are ina position where they cannot speak out even if they eventually do see the truth They are committed to the hes they’ve told because to tell the truth would ex

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pose their lies (And, 1n the case of doctors, for example, expose them to massive lawsuits)

Our daily enemies have for years been the woke citizens who have, for the most part unknowingly, served as helpers for the conspirators who have been working against us for a century or more, and who are now coming out into the open a little more as thew battle to create a New World Order reaches its zenith (For the record the phrase ‘New World Order’ was adopted for the title of a book by H.G Wells in the 1940s but the phrase was also used by Richard Nixon tn the early 1970s Nixon used the phrase frequently and it was regarded as referring to a world super-state - or the world government which has been the aim of the conspirators for decades)

Encouraged by the conspirators (who are experienced at using the naive and shghtly srmple-minded to promote their cause) the woke collaborators have done their best to destroy our histories and our culture They have torn down statues and worked hard to damage the reputations of those who opposed the conspirators So, for example, the woke collaborators frequently target Winston Churchill, attacking his statue and his books Anyone who has ever stood up for freedom im any way 1s maligned and must be erased from culture and history

15
Justice and hberty are now little more than historical concepts, illusions which are today only beheved by the naive, the gulhble and, of course, the completely complrant Judges are as corrupt as politicians, journalists and doctors and ev-eryone in public life

Western societies were set up to separate the various parts of government, and we are taught to believe that is how things stillare Thomas Hobbes said that ‘freedom 1s government divided into small fragments’ But it isn’t how things are today The various branches of government, the parts dealing with the making of laws, the adrmmuistration of laws, the control of the police, finance, banking and the trade unions may appear to be separate but in practice they have been brought together Nothing shows this more clearly than the way the European Union operates The European Parliament has virtually no powers and all the decisions are taken by unelected eurocrats who are themselves controlled and influenced not by ecrtizens but by lobbyistst When the English people voted to take their country out of the European Union in the historic ‘Brexit’ vote, the es tablishment (which ts to say the highly paid e:vil servants and others employed

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In various ways to administer Government policies) simply refused to make any real changes to the way the country1s run The result was that a barrage of new laws were passed by the English Parhament and added to the thousands of EU laws which should have been abolished, but which were kept

As Lord Acton famously said. ‘Power tends to corrupt and absolute power cor rupts absolutely’

Government money (which 1s to say taxpayers’ money) is regularly used to reward favours and to buy complicity and silence And, as the population struggles with roaring inflation, interest rates higher than many people could remember (or were prepared for), disruption caused by climate change nutters, threats of this and that from governments, quangos and the mainstream media, the umons have mntroduced massive pay demands designed, it seems, to create mfts and to make the poor ever poorer Doctors demanded a 35% pay mse and when that was refused, went on strike and increased their demand to 45% Hospital consultants threatened to go on strike and they too wanted a 35% pay rise to add to ther minimum £120,000 a year Nurses went on strike The poor and the elderly were left behind Most demands came from state employees (who were already the best paid and the least hard worlang and had the best perks such as pensions and the ability to work from home or not at all when the fancy took them)

Who was behind the endless strikes?
The usual culpmts of course
The globahsts behind the strikers knew that avilisations collapse when the

gulf between mch and poor gets too big and that ts exactly what ts happen ing And, of course, the middle classes are being destroyed with ever increasing taxes

Individual bberty and free speech have been sacrificed for what we are told 1s the collective good

We live in totalitarian states where we are no longer expected to think for ourselves or to manage our own lives in the way we see fit How long willit be before we are not allowed to think at all?

16
The two party state has become the one world state

It is umpossible to discern any real difference between the two main political parties in the US or the two main parties in England All parties support the war

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against Russta, all supported the covid fraud The parties pretend to squabble occasionally but it 1s all play fighting We are now inches away from a World Government and since the {American owned) International Monetary Fund has already established its first global tax agreement, the World Government isn't far away

Fifty years ago we were told that the world’s socialist governments would come together, under the auspices of the United Nations, to form a global superstate (China was brought into the United Nations because the conspirators Knew that in order to control all the world’s banking and resources, they needed

every country in the world to jon the UN) This new coalition would, it was said, be the Great Merger Nothing much has changed except that things are now moving much rapidly towards global governance and the joining together under what has been mysternously renamed the Great Reset

It 1s interesting to note that back in 1950, Richard Nixon, who was a congressman at the time, introduced a ‘resolution calling for the establishment of a United Nations police force’

And soit came about, of course
But the United Nations didn’t hmut itself to a police force Psychologists, be-

havioural scientists, agronomists and others were employed to work out ways to cornitrol people

Right at the beginning of the UN’s life, there were plans to reduce the size of the world's population and to enforce sterihsation

(It has been reported that some widely promoted vaccinahon programmes were actually designed to reduce fertility Bill Gates, the amateur vaccine propagandist, claimed that the vaccines he was promoting would save lives and reduce the size of the populationin Third World countries Itis difficult to see how those two opposing aims can be reconciled unless the vaccines being used had some effect on fertility — a possibility for which there 1s now a good deal of ev idence In numerous countries around the world, euthanasia programmes have been tntroduced in order to eliminate the elderly and the sick by encouraging them to end their lives In 1953, Evelyn Waugh wrote a novel called Love Among the Ruins in which he described a state-run euthanasia centre In Trudeau's Canada, the Government has introduced a very forceful euthanasia programme called 'medical assistance in dying’ There were 13,000 state sachoned ‘suicides' mn Canada in 2022, and that country is now deciding whether to allow children and the mentally tll to kill themselves In the Netherlands, healthy individuals

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with autism are allowed the option of euthanasta, and Australia is deciding whether to let children as young as 14 loll themselves (or allow someone to doit for them) Today, euthanasia is legal in Belgium, Canada, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Spain, Columbia and parts of Australia

In hospitals tn the United Kingdom, it is now routine for patients who are admitted to hospital to ask if they want to be resuscitated 1f they fall seriously ill Patients are warned that resuscitation can be painful and difficult and may leave them with broken ribs As aresult, many agree to have Do Not Resuscitate’ labels put on their hospital charts Pattents who are frail or unable to give consent are often labelled ‘Do Not Resuscitate’ without the consent of relatives, and the decision not to provide care for patients who are senously ul may be made by quite junior nurses instead of a team of doctors and nurses as used to be the case a few years ago

All over the world, there are plans to destroy local police forces, to destroy local health care and education programmes and to make sure that all atizens (in countnes such as the US) hand in ther guns The plans onginated with the United Nations

Anyone who has ever worked for the United Nations must have known exactly what was happening and must have understood the aims of the organisation for which they were working UN staff are mghly paid and lowly taxed, and were and are traitors who should be executed for thew crimes against mankind

18

To encourage citizens everywhere to accept the idea of more State control, it was decided that noters should be allowed to disrupt towns and cities all over the world, ostensibly campaigning against racism, chmate change and other 1ssues These plans were made over half a century ago Individuals campaigning against the plan for a world government were silenced and arrested but indi viduals whose activities were considered ‘acceptable’ to the conspirators were allowed to do pretty much what they wanted to do Today, there is evidence that the demonstrators who are left alone by the police (the ones campaigning for ‘black lives’ or for ‘net zero’) are receiving vast amounts of money from nch conspirators and, »ndeed, demonstrations are allowed only if they are approved by the conspirators Groups of people complaining about the use of oil are al-

lowed to disrupt traffic, damage buildings and cause massive inconvenience In an attempt to appear even handed, the pohce will occasionally interfere and the courts will punish one or two of those involved but only well after the fact and never before - as frequently happens with those protesting about the conspiracy or about the monarchy No one in Parhament seems to care overmuch that the activities of climate change protestors are undoubtedly responsible for far more deathsthan climate change itself People have missed essential hospital appoimtments, ambulances on emergency calls have been halted and motorists have been unreasonably subjected to the stress of interminable and unnecessary delays The comphieity of the police and the courts makes 1t clear that these tllegal activities are condoned 1f not encouraged by the authorities And as a bonus, the demonstrations provide excuses for the conspirators to mntroduce more oppressive laws, to give the police more powers and to take away freedom and privacy from everyone

The campaigners don’t realise 1t but they have been manipulated and controlled hike so many puppets Campaigns for affirmative action and positive discomunation and demands for reparation have been organised by the conspuators to create a new form of acceptable racism, designed to create anger and racial disharmony

The acceleration of the climate change fraud whichis promoted by a small but very vocal group of bad ternpered, aggressive, hectoring and ignorant fools with no respect for others is talang us, unwillingly, towards the lunacy of net zero The clumate change fanatics (having feasted on a diet of pseudoscientific arguments) think they are now minning the world And, indeed, they are

On the face of 1t, their hectoring and campaigning has been extraordinanly successful but in truth, of course, the campaigners have been allowed a free ride The campaigners have been funded by bankers and hlhonaires who sometimes masquerade as philanthropists

(All great fortunes were, of course, obtamed through lying, cheating or stealing or all three and more It 1s possible to become a millionaire through hard work and :magination but itis only possible to become a billtonaire through dishonesty or through having an ancestor do something dishonest on your behalf)

The chmate change fraud was, of course, all about money and power The self-styled environmentahsts and greens who promote the climate change myth want to step Afncan countries from using fossil fuels Since without fossil fuels those countries will never be able to advance their civilisations in the way that

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countries in the West have progressed, tt seems undenrable that the whole net zero climate change argument is wredeemably racist

I'm afraid that environmentaltsts and Greens are often deeply unpleasant people A fellow from New Mexico, called Dave Foreman, who co-founded an orgamsation called 'Earth First" 1s reported to have described humans as a cancer on nature’ Foreman, an ultra-radical environmentalist, favoured ‘demonstrations':n which members drove sprkes into trees (potentially killang foresters and in at least one case resulting in the operator berng severely injured), tore down power lines, sunk whaling ships and poured sand into the fuel tanks of logging equipment

19
In 2020, the conspirators ramped up their battle to take over the world by intro ducing the entirely invented ‘coronavirus pandemic hoax

Right from the start it was clear that the pandemic hoax had been invented for three matn reasons to bring tn some form of compulsory vaccination programme, to provide an excuse to exterminate a large number of old people (the conspirators have long felt that the world 1s overpopulated and long wormed that the elderly population costs too much In pension payments) and to create a situation where cash could more eastly be outlawed That’s what I said in February and March 2020

There was more toit, of course
The conspirators had decided to use their fake pandemic to help them lead

the way forward to the development of a world government — the great reset, the new normal, the new world order

All this was being promoted by the World Economic Forum (with its extraordinary enthusiasin for the abolition or private property, as promoted in the Communist Mamifesto by Karl Marx) and by a secret organisation known as the Bilderbergers which consists of a bunch of bankers, arms dealers, drug company

bosses, food company bosses and obedient politicians

The fake pandemic with its lockdowns and enhanced compliance programmes was seen as an essential step towards the introduction of a system of social credit, digital currency and digital passports The covid fraud was seen as a way to obtarn total control over all citizens

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Central bankers, bankers and left wimg politicians are al! desperately keen to eradicate cash and to force everyone to use digital money - in the form of credit cards, debit cards, crypto-currenctes and accounts with organisations such as PayPal Scores of central banks already have their digital currencies ready - eventually they'll be moulded tnto a single global currency known as the Universal Monetary Unit or, quite possibly, the Unicoin

The standard argument of those who want to replace cash with digital currency ts that using your smart phone at the till is more convenient than using cash What the bankers and collaborators don’t mention 1s that the price for that convenience ts compliance and slavery You can flash a piece of plastic, your watch, your smart phone or your tattooed or implanted wnst, instead of having to put up with the burden of carrying cash in a wallet or purse, but the unspoken dowmside ts that in return you have to put all your trust in the integnty and good intentions of the bankers and central bankers - people who have already boasted that they will use your rehance on thetr services to decide how you spend your money, Where you spend 1t and how much of it you are allowed to keep

The bankers, the conspirators, want to control every transaction as part of the social credit-digital world they are building Governments, banks, supermarkets, travel agencies, health care services, the police willcombine their databases with YouTube, Google, Facebook and other monstrously intrusive organisations which collect, own and then sell your private information

I've been warning about the end of cash for at least three decades, and the conspiratornal authonties have been pushing hard for the introduction of digital currencies since the days before laptops and smart phones

Today, the bankers (arded and abetted by politicians) are closing banks as fast as they can (arguing falsely that everyone wants to bank online) and they're making it difficult to take cash out of your bank ATM machines are rapidly dis appearing, and if you try to take cash out of your account over the counter you could well end up being interrogated hke a criminal.

Once the digital currencies become the only way to earn, save or spend, we will all be slaves The central banks will be able to control our money They already plan to limit each individual to between £10,000 and £20,000 Anything more than that will simply disappear Negative mterest rates will discourage savings Money wil have a limited shelf hfe —just as money 1n mobile phones can disappear after a few months And the bankers will decide how you can spend

your money

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It is worth pomting out, by the way, that the central banks have mostly become ‘independent’ When this happened in the UK, in 1997 the Labour Government misled the country, saying said that it was giving the Bank of England its independence and granting it operational independence over monetary polrey so that it could be free of government influence In fact, this was rather dis Ingenuous since all central banks were mod:fied to suit the requirements of the financial elites —- who prefer to deal with independent banks In the European Union, it was the Maastricht Treaty which gave tndependence to the central banks The European Central Bank, in the EU 1s controlled by Deutsche Bank (which was for along time controlled by Abs, a former Nazi) and other German and European banks The EU and its Parhament have no control over the bank or its policy Monetary policy all around the world 1s controlled by the world’s leading financial stitutions Governments, remember, have no control

Everyone, it seems, wants to get rid of cash
First, companies which accept payment by card have to pay commission to

the credit card compames The commission can sometimes be very high with 5% and 7% commusston rates not at all uncommon

Second, clearing banks don’t hke cash because handling it ts thme consuming and, therefore, expensive Moving money around simply by pressing numbers on a keyboard 1s much quicker and cheaper (though, curiously, the length of time required to move money from ane account to another seems to have lengthened since such methods became available)

Third, governments and government agencies love to see citizens forced to rely on digital money because 1t 1s much easier ta keep control of what everyone 1s earning and spending when all money goes through computers So, for example, in the UK the tax office (HMRC) easily obtained details of what taxi drivers are doing by looking at the records from compames such as Uber When drivers apply to renew their licences, HMRC sends out threatening letters suggesting that they may have made an under declaration or no declaration at ail

And, of course, there are all those individuals who think that using plastic to pay for everything 1s clever and modern They don’t realise that plastic cards and chips under thetr skin are enslaving them and removing the last vestiges of freedom.

Any business which rehes on a financtal trail (eg one that uses an e-commerce site) can now be easily momtored by all government departments And, of course, it 1s much easier for banks or the Government to cut off an individual’s

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access to their own money 1f everything 1s done digitally And when all money is digital, banks and other financial mnstitutions will be able to charge what they like Tax authorities will take what they like from your account

In the new world of digital money, anyone who shares what ts labelled ‘hate speech’ or 'misinformation’ will be banned from having an account (It

1s, of course, already happening) All those old tweets, and the trme you gave a ‘thumbs down’ to the WEF, will be marked against you

Remember how American citizens who gave money to the Canadian Truckers had their bank accounts frozen? If you’ve ever criticised your government then they will make you pay heavily for your tmpertinence

Those indrviduals who have already lost their PayPal accounts will probably never be allowed to have digital accounts And without digital accounts they will starve

It’s already becoming nigh on impossible to buy petrol without a credit card And the number of car parks where cash is strll accepted is shrinking fast

Banks throughout the world are preparing to close down all free thinkers If you think I’m exaggerating just check out what has already happened

It has been made clear (by the Bank of England and other clearing banks) that when cash has been replaced with digital currencies, the banks will control how people spend their money It will be possible to make broad judgements (for example, no one will be able to buy aleohal) and spectfic ones (patients with early heart trouble will not be allowed to buy certain foods) It will also be possible for governments, banks and companies to monitor spending habits So,ifthereisa shortage of eggs for example, the authonties will be able to make sure that no one buys more eggs than they are allowed

Removing cash from soctety will make life incredibly difficult (for which read “smpossible’) for those who are not computer hterate, for beggars and for char-

ities who rely on cash The quality of our lives will be massively dimmushed by the disappearance of cash And, of course, getting rid of cash can be used to track where we go and what we do

Many local counctls are now foretng motorists to use an App avatlable only on a smart phone to pay for parking, and 1n those places it 1s impossible to pay for a parking place with cash The mformation which motonsts are forced to give can be used in many ways (and will be sold for a variety of purchasers so, for example, thieves will know when householders are away from their homes) Forcing motortsts to use a stnart phone in order to park a vehicle is clearly discrmina-

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tory (since 1t means that those without a smart phone cannot park) and almost

certainly illegal

And, of course, people tend to over-spend when they use credit or debit cards for everything they buy Using cash helps keep people out of debt

It’s vital to remember that they want to get rid of cash for their benefit and not for our benefit Removing cash will empower the conspirators and remove, for ever, the last vestiges of our independence

We really are close to the end as far as cash is concerned According to data provider Merchant Machine, cash is now used in only 1% of payments in the most digitaltsed economies in the world, now including Sweden, Denmark, Singapore and the UK Every time anyone uses a credit or debit card, or flashes a contactless payment card for a small purchase, they are taking us closer to a dig Ital society and digital enslavement.

The end of cash 1s now just months away
And when cash disappears tt will take with tt the last vestige of our freedom
The restrictions on what we can, and cannot, do with our own money get

longer by the day For example, states within the EU will have to collect information on the ownership of luxury goods such as aeroplanes, boats and cars and each member state will have to establish a financial intelligence unit’ Rules in England now make tt extraordinarily difficult for citizens to access their awn money or even to move it from one account to another

I recently tried to take some of my money out of my account and was shut in a room and interrogated like a criminal before eventually and rather begrudgingly, being given an envelope containing the cash I'd asked for

Even moving from one account to another has become fiendishly bewildering and time consuming

I was standing in a bank the other day trymg to move money from one account to another I was moving my money from one of my own accounts to another of my own accounts [don't know uf you’ve tried doing this recently but it gets harder by the week You need to produce a driving heence or passport, of course (Heaven help you if you don’t have one or the other, or preferably both) And you need your bank card And, depending upon the mental state of the cashier, you may need a utrhty bill, a tax form and a council tax demand You may soon need a note from your mother

And, of course, they now have a veritable litany of questions to fire at you ‘Has anyone asked you to make this transaction? Are you under pressure to do this’

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And so on and so on They pretend the questions are to protect us but only the naive and dim-witted belzeve that These stupid questions are devised by very wicked people to delay the whole procedure and to force us all to bank online

One of the daftest questionsis this one ‘Is anyone waiting outside for you?’
Standing next to me, at the neighbouring window, stood a little old lady well,

inher nmeties She too was trying to move money from one account to another
so that she could pay a bill

‘Is anyone waiting outside for you?’ asked the bank clerk
'Oh yes,’ satd the little old lady naively 'My friend brought me’
The clerk looked as pleased as if she'd won the lottery ‘Oh, well Ican't help you

then,’ she satd with a big smile and a sense of satisfaction you could have bottled
The Irttle old lady didn’t understand ‘But my nerghbour had to bring me,’ she

explained. ‘I'm 93 [had to give up my driving licence'
The poor woman didn’t understand that logic and honesty are no longer

relevant
‘But your neighbour might have put you under pressure to make this trans

action,’ said the clerk, bum full of sanctimonious, self-nghteous, box-ticking
obedience

'My netghbour?' said the old lady ‘Why would she do anything nasty to me?
I've known her for nearly 50 years " She looked around, bewildered ‘I've been
banking here for years Doesn't anyone recognise me”

‘That doesn’t matter,’ sad the clerk, her joy now slightly diluted by exaspera
tion ‘I can’t help you if you have someone waiting for you. Those are the mules '
And then she added the killer It’s for your protection’

And so the old lady, puzzled and confused, tottered out of the bank and back to
her netghbour’s car

I swear that happened AndI’m not surpnsed
(The banks make a great fuss about our responsibilities and thei lack of

them. But did you know that Barclays Bank has just been fined $361 mullion
by the US Securities and Exchange Commission? And do you know why? Well,
they ‘accidentally’ sold $17 7 billton worth of structured financial products for
which they did not have authorisation The total effect on shareholders (includ-
ing many pensioners), as aresult of this $17 7 billion ‘accident’, was to help push
down net mcome by 19% The httle old lady's one mistake was that she didn't
tell the clerk to move $17 7 billion that she didn’t have from one account to an

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other They’d have done that with a smile and probably given her a free pen and
a cup of coffee too)

Morons (of whom there are many these days) claim, as they have been told,

that the inquisition 1s for our benefit That's yet another lic The banks want to force us online And, as a side effect, they want to absolve themselves from blame when they screw up (which they do on a regular basis) If you want evidence that the banks have been pohticised just look at the way that individuals who dare to stand up and question the system lose their bank accounts In Canada, mtizens who stood up in defence of truckers protesting about vaccine mandates, lost their bank accounts And the same thing 1s happening with fnghtening regulanty everywhere else In England, the boss of an independent platform carrying free speech videos lost his bank account and found that no other bank would accept hrm as a customer No one could tell him what his crime was Nigel Farage, the well-known politician, was suddenly told that a bank he had been with for 40 years was going to close his accounts - both business and personal A man who asked why his local biuulding society was fes tooned with flags celebrating homosexuality found the cost of free speech when the building society responded to his query by closing his account

Bank staff seern to have been indoctrinated by the same people who indoctrinated NHS staff, train drivers, civil servants, teachers, council employees and Just about everyone else in this increasingly miserable and oppressive world of ours

(Teachers call what they do ‘bramwashing m a good cause’ But can braimwashing ever be defended? If the evidence for their clams were sohd and honest they would not need to make stuff up or to attempt to brainwash their students For decades now, school teachers have been tndoctrinating rather than teaching ther pupils, promotang the myth of chmate change, changing history to meet woke demands and altering the balance of history to suit their propaganda And refusing to allow pupzls to question or debate the official version of history)

Taking cash out of your own account has become an exercise in patience and determination

I recently went into a branch of my bank wanting to take out some money - a little more than the machine would allow me to withdraw I[had bills to pay and I wanted to buy some presents

‘Are you going to take this money home and keep it there?’ asked the clerk

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I thought this was an incredibly stupid question The woman was a stranger and she had my address on a screen in front of her She wanted to know nf I was going to take money home and keep it there to be stolen What an idiot So 1 was a little cautious As any sensible person would, I said ‘No’

'So, why do you want this money?’ asked the smpertinent bank clerk
‘To buy sweets,' I replied It has been my standard reply to this question for

years
Bang | could tell from her eyes that the metaphorical shutters had come

down
You can't make light-hearted comments any more
The clerk looked at her screen as 1f it were telling her something
‘Your request has been blocked,’ said the clerk
In full sight of other customers I was ushered into a room and the door was

closed
And I was interrogated I felt like a criminal Most people would, I think, have

found it a humiliating and embarrassing encounter
Phone calls were made | was instructed to answer questions put to me on

the telephone (I couldn’t understand the questioner’s accent and so! needed a translator) To check my identity I was asked for my date of birth (a piece of information that is about as secret as Prince Harry's level of affection for his brother)

And eventually, after what seemed hke several hours of interrogation, I was, with ill-grace and no apology, given the amount of money | had requested.

It wasn'ta loan 1 was asking for It was my money
(As an aside, a week later we had to call a drains expert in to deal with a

drain which had been blocked by tree roots The man dealing with our drains told me, in precise detail, about my experience at the bank He even knew the precise amount of money I’d tried to take out of the bank Banks may pretend to care about their customers but there are, :t seems, no longer any rules about confidentiality)

It 1s, of course, all part of the scheme ta force us to bank online ~ ready for the digital currency they have ready for us

Your bank hates you They want to tum you mto nothing more than numbers ona computer

And the staff of banks everywhere are, | fear, too stupid to realise that as soon as the digital currency is here, managed entirely online, then they will all be

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surplus to requirements Every last one of them will be joining the dole queue - where they wall stay forever, surviving on their Universal Basic Income and liv-Ingina small cardboard walled flat the size of a dog kennel

The idea of providing citizens with a Universal Basic Income, now so popular with governments and consp:rators and neoliberals everywhere, is not a new one During his first year as President of the United States, Richard Nixon an-nounced his ‘New Federalism' programme which would provide a Guaranteed Annual Income to al] Americans The proposal would have massively increased the power of the Government Left-wingers welcomed the idea as an example of

‘creeping soctalisrn’ Nixon also suggested a decentralisation programme which was ostensibly designed to spread power to local politicans by handing out subsidies and payments Nixon announced that he had become a Keynesian What he forgot to mention was that John Maynard Keynes, the economist, was a socialist whose intention was to promote the ‘euthanasia of capitalism’ Like almost all economists who followed him, Keynes was a neo-liberal, an mtellectually, emotionally and morally stunted breed without whom the conspirators would have never been able to promote their Great Reset The chief beneficiaries of the efforts made by the neo-liberals have, of course, been those 'working' in the finance, insurance and real estate sectors of society for those are now where wealth accumulation is taking place - well away from traditionally useful commercial and productive activities The chief losers have been those involved in making and selling products which people need 1n order to live and the clear winners have been those m financial services who pay themselves huge bonuses even when their banks are losing money The global economy ts not built on the handling of money rather than the making of things or providing those services which make people's lives better

21

Much of what is happening 1s described as progress but it isn’t really, of course — it’sjust change Anda good deal of itis change contnved to keep us all too busy to notice what ls gotng on tn the world, and too wrapped up in our own daily problems to take action against the conspirators, the collaborators and the constant attacks on our freedom and humanity Even small thmgs become incredibly time consuming and exhausting The bizarre and indefensible ‘recychng' programmes which were introduced globally (everything happens in lockstep these days) were designed to make us worry about non-existent climate change, to

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make us compliant and to force us to accept that we must do what we are told, even in our own homes, and to keep us busy Most of the carefully washed and sorted recycling material ts dumped or burnt, and the environmental cost of collecting recycling material far exceeds any value that might accrue Inthe UK, for example, much of the recycling material has been carried to countrtes far away to be dumped or burnt There isn’t even any point in recycling paper (the most traditional recycling material) It 1s better for the environment to grow trees for that purpose and to burn the discarded paper to produce electricity or heat

If you order a book {or whatever else) online you will be bombarded with emails There will be a message to say that the purchase has been made, one to say that your order is being dealt with, another to let you know that the book has been passed to the delivery company, one to let you know that the delivery company has received the package, one to inform you that the dehvery company Is preparing to deliver the book, one to iet you know that the book is on its way and one to tell you that the package has been delivered Then you will receive an email from the seller to let you know that the delivery company has done their job and delivered the book. Later there will be another email from them wanting you to rate their service and one from the delivery company wanting you to let them know how well you think they did. If you don’t reply immediately those emails will be repeated at regular intervals This barrage of unnecessary emails

keeps us occupied with pointless trivia (Not infrequently, I receive two copies of each of the emails in this tedious chain }

The word ‘progress’ 1s used as a synonym for ‘better’, but how do you define ‘better’? Is receiving an email from a fnend on hohday better than receiving a postcard? Is the world better when cars all look exactly the same? Is it better when log fires are forbidden by health and safety officials? Are trains better now that there are no restaurant and sleeper cars? Or has hfe been destroyed by fanatics, cultists andignorant meddlers, acting, unknowimely, on behalf of conspirators arming for a Great Reset? Is life better now that there are no junk shops, norag and bone men and no odd job men who could repair just about anything you couldn’t deal with yourself? Is life better now that family doctors work the same hours as librarians and you have to plan your emergencies a day or two ahead 1f you hope to ride to hospital m an ambulance? Are hospitals better now that nurses spend more time in meetings than on the ward and are always too busy, and self-important, to find a bedpan, plump up pillows, help a frail patient with their meal or put a bunch of flowers into a vase? Is it progress that children

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now learn with the aid of iPads mstead of berng taught with pens and paper and chalk and a board? Isa smart phone real progress over a piece of slate and a slate pencil? Children half a century ago played hopscotch, skipped with ropes and in the winter played football with coats as goalposts whtle tn the summer they played cricket with stumps chalked on lampposts On their summer holidays they splashed in paddling pools or sailed toy yachts on boating ponds (all now filled in for health and safety reasons) and they rode on donkeys and played one penny games on the pier Is it simply nostalgia when you Know in your heart that things really were better then?

If you object to all progress then the conspirators will label you a ‘Luddite’, even if much of what they label progress isn't progress at all

It rsn’t difficult to argue that children have little or no future today The conspirators and the collaborators have taken away their education, their hope, their sense of comfort and even their happiness Mental health problems among the young are tising at arate never seen before Even before the fake pandemic of 2020 the incidence of such problems among the young was frighteningly high Today, there ts an epidemic of mental illness Millions of children, teenagers and young people are takong tranquillisers and anti-depressants (even though these have been proven to be of no value) and often taking them for years at a time The lockdowns, the social distancing regulations and the partial or complete closure of hospital departments mean that those requiring specialist help will beon waiting hsts for years if not for life

Is a pub with a log fire and fnendly bar staff better than a pub with a good internet connection? Are motorways, with endless queues, better than winding country roads which take you to your destination just as quickly and with far more pleasure? Are self-driving cars better than cars which have to be driven? How will self-driving cars manage to navigate English country roads and all those tiny, bind junctions* Who 1s going to provide a suitable call out service for

all the electric cars which are stranded in country lanes when their batteries run out?

Is a traditional English breakfast better or worse than a bowl of sugar coated cereal? Why does it now take a week or more for a postcard to reach its destina-hon when in Yictonan times, in the 19th century, a postcard put in a pillar box in the morning would armive at 1ts destmnation in the afternoon? The postcade or zip code was, surely, an early sign of the end of civilisation I recently bought around 1,000 old Edwardian postcards (no one wants them these days - they

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cost just a few pounds) and although the addresses consisted of nothing more than {at most) a name, a number, a street and a town, the cards clearly reached their destinations safely There ts less mail today because so many people use email - so why does the mail take so much longer to get where it's going?

Is reading a book on asmart phone easier and more fun than reading a paper back - with no need to squint and constantly adjust the position of the screen on a sunny day? Was the NHS better when there was a dental service for all? Were charities more or less inclusive when they served merely to serve those in need rather than to enrich executives and advertising agencies' Was life better when we used public phone boxes instead of having to carry a mobile phone with us? Were radio and television programmes worse when traditional events such as the Promenade Concerts celebrated cultural traditions rather than global ones?

Was the Tate Britain art gallery better when it paid more attentzon to tradi-tional artists than te the demands of the woke' The Tate Britain gallery now has just one room for art from 1545 to 1640 but 14 rooms devoted to art from 1940 onwards Of the work on view, 200 items were made since the millennium

and the work mm the publicly funded gallery has been carefully curated to ensure that men and women are equally represented among living artists — regardless of reputation or the value of their work Modern art on display, representing just a twentieth of the time span of the collection, takes up a quarter of the space Culture, as well as history, has been changed ta fit the requirements of the con-spirators and the collaborators. Labels attached to older pictures highlight social injustice, colonial exploitation and prejudice The gallery seems to illustrate the way in which the feelings of the few now dominate the views of the many tn every sphere of activity

The aims of the WEF and other organtsations seem to be to destroy each nation's hentage, to destroy every country's culture In the UK, all major insti-tutions seem to have become very woke The National Trust, the Marylebone Cricket Club and other former mstitutions are now unrecognisably woke — to the great confusion of long-standing members Long established regiments 1m the army have disappeared or been merged

The aim of the conspirators is to change the world by erasing nations, farnihes and communities and by destroying everything humans consider to be personal and valuable Immugratron (whether legal or Wlegal) 1s encouraged 1n order to

create impoverishment, resentment, racism, terrorism and pienty of excuses for war (Asan aside, it used to be thought that patriotism was good but nattonalism

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was bad Today, however, both are unacceptable because there can be no countriesin the New World Order)

Naturally, immigration programmes have led to resentment on both sides and, especially in France, the development of racial and cultural ghettoes 1s leading to civil war

22
In this book I will show how the United Nations, the Round Table, Black Lives Matter, the Democrats, the Republicans have destroyed our hives with the controversies over gender (with imsane gender language changes being introduced with the sole idea of creating confusion and destroying human relationships), transgender politics (also designed to bewilder and create diviston) and exaggerated campaigns against sexual abuse (‘He said my haw looked mice’, ‘He said he hiked my dress’ 'My hfe 1s now ruined’) A wolf whistle used to be regarded by most women as a compliment, today it is a criminal offence The conspirators have deliberately created diviston, distrust and fear between the sexes, and the neoliberals who run the global economic system have consistently shown that ther arm ts not to create more fairness, or to advance the rights of women in those countries where unfairness is commonplace, but to create as many divisions as possible between men and women The atm of the neoliberals who make up the Establishment, and who are pushing us towards their beloved Great Reset, 1s to break up soctety 1n as many ways as possible so as to ensure that men and women are too busy fighting one another to worry about the progress to wards the New World Order Itis for this very same reason that national history and national and regional culture are betng banished from every aspect of life, and why schools and colleges no longer teach students material which could be construed as patriotic or in any way Lkely to lead to preater pride

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Then there are the absurdly exaggerated accusations of racism, always popular with communists who see such accusations as a way to break down society, with accusations buult on the flimsiest of pretexts (‘He couldn't pronounce my name properly and so he 1s a racist’ ‘He didn’t pick me for his team and so he must be a racist’) A well- known personality had to issue a grovelling apology after people with too much treme on their hands found that he had once sent a tweet commenting that he perhaps needed to learn another language when he was tn

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The attempts to outlaw racism themselves produce racism, « 5 course with affirmative action and positive cdhscrimmmatron being nothing more than racism of another colour Appointing a black wotan to a company board of directors symply because she 1s black and female, and helps the company hits its diversity quota, 1s racist and sexist and just plan wrong The black woman should

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In this book I wall show how the United Nations, the Round Table, Black Lives Matter, the Democrats, the Republicans have destroyed our lives with the con- troversies over gender (with insane gender language changes being introduced with the sole idea of creating confusion and destroying human relationships), transgender politics {also designed to bewilder and create division) and exagger ated campaigns against sexual abuse (‘He said my hair looked mice’, ‘He said he liked my dress’ ‘My hfe is now muned’) A wolf whistle used to be regarded by most Women as a compliment, today it 1s a criminal offence The conspirators have deliberately created division, distrust and fear between the sexes, and the neoliberals who run the global economic system have consistently shown that their arm is not to create more fairness, or to advance the rights of women in

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The attempts to outlaw racism themselves produce racism, of course, with affirmative action and positive discrimination being nothing more than racism of another colour Appointing a black woman to a company board of directors

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simply because she 1s black and female, and helps the company hits its diversity quota, ts racist and sexist and just plain wrong The black woman should be ap pointed because she is the best candidate and will do the best job for employees, shareholdets and customers

Advertisers who show photos of happy couples or families mnvariably show a black couple or a black man and a white woman (usually a blonde) It is now uncommon to see any white men appearing in print or televiston advertisements

This isnt simple political correctness but is done because it enables the advertiser to avoid any accusations thatit might be racist It is virtue signalling and it s actually racist of course

lread recently of the exastence of an ‘mitiative' in the UK called ‘Black Farmer’s New Face of Farming’ with a range of food products called ‘The Black Farmer’ In the United States there 1s an organisation called Black Farmers’ Market And there are a number of trade organisations along these lines There is, for example, a National Black Police Association and in London there is the Metropolitan Black Police Association There ts a Black Writers Guild, a Black Writers Society

and a Black Writers’ Association And there is a Black Agents and Editors’ Group I can’t help thinking that by defining a group according to sian colour these no

doubt well intended individuals are sustaining and even creating racism And I wonder what the reaction would be if a group of farmers founded an organisation for white farmers Or ifa group of white policemen founded an association called the White Police Association I find xt difficult to avoid the suspicion that creating racial groups in this way 1s part of the conspirators' plan to create disharmony im society

In June 2023, it was revealed that the RAF has been practising discrimination against white men 'Dtscriminatton' is, of course, just a pohte word for 'racism' If a black manis unfairly treated because of his skin colour it ts racism and there 1s an uproar, sackings and scandal [f a white man 1s unfairly treated because of his skin colour it 1s discrimination and no one cares There seems httle doubt that if racism ts 2 serious problem in the UK it is white men and women who are most commonly the victims

We see footballers and other sportsmen kneeling in an attempt to show their moral integnty but merely displaying just how easily they can be mampulated They seem to me to be displaying shallow fake compassion and their own propensity for virtue signalling When it comes to the crunch, however, the sportsmen seem sadly short of moral courage At the World Football Cup in

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Qatar, for example, male footballers bravely announced that they would wear a rainbow armband during the tournament to show thew support for homosexuals (For unknown reasons, homosexuals have stolen the rainbow, longa Christian symbol, asanemblem And homosexuality is outlawed tn Qatar One might have thought that a better and more fitting way of expressing their feelings would have been to refuse to go to Qatar at all) However, when the organisers announced that footballers wearing ranbow armbands would be sanctioned, the footballers all abandoned their enthusiasm and put away their rarnbow armbands

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The Bank of England {which ts responsible for making a mess of the Enghsh economy and failing to control inflatron) has said that people of any 'gender identity' (I think they mean men or women but who knows) can be treated as pregnant And the Bank ts having some gender-neutral lavatories built so that lady bankers and gentlemen bankers who aren't sure of their gender identity can go to the loo together and share the expenence in polktically correct harmony The Bank's insane pregnancy policies mean that anyone can now be classified as a birthing parent and claim family leave from the bank, | bet there are some people facing 7% mortgages who wish the Bank would concentrate on inflation and worry a little more about the economy and a little less about showing how wokey it is

There are endless attacks on mascuhmity and femmunity with constant pressure towards unisex washrooms and a untsex world We can only stand and watch the banishing of the family unit and the nse of the State as a central factor tn our lives, the prejudice and dishonesty of the mainstream media (which now seems to specialise in rmisinformation and disinformation and rarely if

ever, reports the news without a built in judgemental commentary), the nse of homosexuality and the remainder of the specialities within the LGBTOQIA community (I tried to find out what the Q, the! and the A stand for but failed in this simple task No one 1 spoke to knew the answer, and even the internet was unable to provide an answer)

It used to be considered polite for a man to offer a co-worker or friend a compliment (‘Your har looks nice’, ‘That dress suits you' and so on) without any one being offended Indeed, 1f the comphment were a genuine one the recipient would be pleased and flattered Today, such remarks are considered to be signs

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of extreme sexist behaviour and men have been fired for saying such things and branded as sex offenders It 1s even now considered sexist for aman to stand up on public transport and to offer hts seat to a woman, or to allow a woman to proceed before him through a doorway (Ironically, men may sometimes be accused of being rude for not dotng these things.)

And, of course, those promoting women’s professional sport are insisting that as much attention be given to female football and cncket teams as to the more traditional maleteams Huge amounts of money are being funnelled into female sport even though the evidence clearly shows that there ts very little spectator mterest in matches played between women's teams or indeed when individual women play sports (women have been playing professional tenmis and goif for decades but the interest in their games has always been minute when compared with the mterest m male versions of those games) The media, as always, has been supine and some newspapers now give more coverage to wamen’s sports than to men's sports with the result that their readers find it mgh on mmpossible to navigate their pages A casual reader will see a headline that screams 'England World Cup Trrimph’ and will find themselves reading about the success of a team of 14-year-old girls playing lacrosse or netball

Once again, there ts a hidden agenda
Promoting and encouraging sexism encourages conflict and confusion - two

essential building blocks regarded as essential for pushing us into the Great Reset And new rules about ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ have replaced humanity, goodwall and kindness with statutory obligations, statutory whmgeing and statutory recriminations The rules about diversity, inclusion and equality are doing far more harm than good. You can't regulate for kindness

Something called the Independent Commussion for Equity tn Cricket (commussioned by the England and Wales Cricket Board in a mood of self-flagellation) caused a storm (and a good many headhnes) by complaining that racism, sexism, classtsm and elitrsm are widespread in the game of encket.

I've been following cricket all my life I have spent a huge chunk of my life on cricket grounds I've spoken to many cricketers And I've been inside professional dressing rooms as a doctor I've written four books on cricket (including The Village Cricket Tour and Thomas Winsden’s Cricketing Almanack) and I've

written a column and articles for specialist cncket magazines And 1 believe the ICEC report will do far more harm than good

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But | wasn’t m the shghtest surpnsed by its conclusions The death of encket has been on the cards for some time After all, some of those involved with the dangerously fascist Great Reset, the climate change myth and the absurd re-wilding nonsense want to stop all sport because it takes up too much space and mvolves travel

To me the ECB's report stinks of woke gibberish
Equity in ericket, for heaven’s sake That’s areal ESG word
The woman who was chairman of the committee is described has having ex-

perience in ‘governance, inclusion and equity’
What a surprise
A woman described as a semor independent director of the ECB said ‘Promot-

Ing equity, diversity and rnclusion across the game is critical to the success of our game-wide strategy Inspiring Generations and our purpose of connecting com

munities through cricket’
Rishi Sunak, a well-known war criminal, took time off from sending depleted

uranium shells to Ukraine to get in touch with the ECB. He wants cricket to be inclusive and open to everybody [actually rather thought it was Even blind peo-ple play cricket

I think they've all missed the point (If ’'m allowed to have a view on this - which I rather fear may not be the case these days)

Cricket isn't a social programme or an experiment in human resources
Cricketisa game Or 1 thought it was
If people want to play they play If they want to watch they watch If people

from some areas of society aren’t interested then that's fine There are plenty of other games they can play Cricket doesn’t exist to change society and lead us mto the Great Reset

The report makes tt look as 1f cricket had huge problems
I don’t believe it does
At least, I don’t think 1t did
I think this report could create some very btg problems and it is my belief it

could do more harm than good
They won't agree with me, of course, but! fear this report will exacerbate sus-

picrons, paranoia, resentment and entitlement and actually create racism
If you look at tenmis, rugby, football, gymnastics, chess, dominoes or syn-

chronised swimming through the same distorting spectacles, you could claim they all have problems There are far more black players in top level professtonal

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football than makes statistical sense How many black tennis players are there in local tennis clubs? How many Mushm women are there involved in synchronised swimming? Enough? Not enough? Too many? Who decides?

The report says that there must be a ‘fundamental overhaul of the women’s pay structure in order to achieve parity with the men’s game’

I’m ternbly sorry, (and this really isn't a sexist comment, it’s a realistic comment) but that 1s like saying that the members of the chorus 1n an opera should be paid the sarne as the lead tenor and soprano

Look at the stands when women are playing There are huge empty spaces
If women are to be paid the same as men then the men will have to take a huge

pay cut There certainly isn’t enough money m the sport to pay men and women the same asthe men currently receive

The report says that Black cricket has not been adequately supported
Black cricket?
I thought teams had black and white players together Gordon Greenidge and

Barry Richards were probably the greatest opening partnership in history One was black and one was white

Are we now gomg to have black teams and white teams?
The report says that ‘cricket needs to have a clear set of values’
No it doesn’t need a set of artificially created values
Cricket needs some laws Which it has And it needs players to play the game

fairly and honourably Which they mostly do That’s where the phrase ‘it’s not encket’ came from

What on earth do they mean anyway?
The 317-page report says that costs are prohibitive
Really?
Have they looked at the costs of getting started 1n motor racing or horse jump-

ing? Or skiamg? Or yachting?
Do they want taxpayers to provide every child with a free bat and ball?
Kids who want to play cricket need an old tennis ball, a piece of wood anda

lamp-post on which to chalk the wickets And someone to play with
And look at this quote from Ben Stokes, the England cricket captain, made

after the absurd and damaging report was made pubhe ‘Il am Ben Stokes, bornin

New Zealand, a state educated pupil who dropped out of school at 16 with one GCSE in PE I needed help with the spelling and grammar in this speech and! am sitting here as the England men’s Test captain

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Elitismm?
Where ts the elitism?
The truth about cricket is that most of the people who play it and watch it are

rather decent They don't play or watch to change society They play or watch because it's fun They enjoy it And the last thing most people think about ts skin colour

It isn’t the fault of cncket that the money grubbers sold the TV nghts to a satellite TV company - thereby ensuring that kids don't watch tt and aren't interested in playing

Itisn’t the fault of ertcket that local authority schools don’t play much cricket
That's because local councils sold off the playing fields to developers.

There's sexism, racism and old-fashioned snobbery 1m all corners of life
But cricket isn’t any worse than anywhere else though | admit there isn't a

Test sertes for transgender cricketers and there obviously should be
This accusatory and adversarial report commissioned by the ECB seems to me

to be full of modern 'Great Reset’ language mtersectionalhty and cisgender make an appearance, of course

The report apparently crtictses the fact that some who watch cricket don't like drums being played all day long Well if I watch cricket I rather hke st to be a peaceful activity Is that now a race crime? Drums and impromptu bands and noisy behaviour should be banned May I say that, please?

And the report criticises the huge number of cncket followers who dislike the Hundred — which ts a daft form of biff bat cricket rather too symuilar to French cricket for my tastes I want the Hundred (whichis, [believe, destroying county cricket) ta be forgotten about Am [allowed to say that?

Are we now to be told what sort of cricket we can enjoy?
Oh, and the report talks about Type K’ individuals
‘Type k’ people are, apparently ‘white men, educated 1n private schools, who

are straight and cisgender and do not have a disabihty’
I would like to think that this utterly awful report will go straight into the bin

And the ECB which commissioned the report should also go in the bin
But they won't
I fear that ‘action’ will be taken and the death of cncket will get ever closer

Cricket has been painfully woke for some years now The annual Wisden

seems to have become woke And I think the MCC 1s pretty woke too

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And, thanks to this report, I suspect that things are now gomg to get much worse

The overall plan, espoused by the climate change enthusiasts, is to stop all sport - both amateur and professtonal - because it takes up land which they believe should be used for rewilding and because it involves travel

25
The project known as Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) 1s a dan gerous and enormously damaging form of woke capitalism, which 1s used as a weapon by governments, banks and regulators and even promoted with religtous fervour by brokers, analysts and financial journalists ESG ts, without a doubt, doing far more harm than good and 1s part of the conspirators’ plan to ensure that 'we own nothing’

Larry Fink, the chairman and chief executive of BlackRock (which 1s an investment company) says, rather bizarrely, that ‘access to capital 1s not a nght Ttis a privilege’ and has warned that corporate ‘behaviours are going to have to change, and this is one thing we are asking compamies, you have to force behavtours and at BlackRock we are forcing behaviours’

Fink is not a politraan or an elected official but the company he runs has control of trillions of dollars’ worth of investments His role as a money manager means that he has a fiduciary responsibility to those whose money he looks after

Fink's outrageous arrogance and hubnstic determination to claim power beyond reason has, fortunately, aroused some opposition from those who don't accept that Mr Fink hasthe rightto bully the directors and staff of other compantes or to take dectsions on behalf of shareholders In Florida, US, the Governor, Ron DeSantis, has signed into law a bill which prohibits state officrals in Florida from investing public money to achieve ESG goals

Meanwhile, outside Florida, those who doubt or question ESG are cancelled and likely ta lose their credit rating Corporate doubters will be excluded from bond markets and forced onto the fringe of corporate society The three biggest credit rating agencies have added ESG ratings to their portfolios, and so every company in the world has to obey the demands of the ESG enthusiasts Companies which produce hydrocarbons (such as o1l companies) have great difficulty in borrowmg money and shareholders have lost their rights as company owners

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Fink believes that clumate change is real (despite the evidence that it 1s not), that children m kandergarten schools should be taught about sex, including ho mosexuality (despite the opposition of many parents), and that everyone (boy or girl) should be free to use whichever loo they prefer (despite the opposition ofal-most everyone of both sexes)

Fink appears to believe that companies should ignore their shareholders and adopt something called stakeholder capitahsm —something which means giving power to lobby groups and elites and creating a new form of socialism whereby other people's money ts distributed to the poor and used to pursue the pohicies Fink feels are most important. In order to ensure that his policies are followed, Fink pushes through changes in company policy, and by bullying and pushing hard to promote his pet theories, ensures that boards of directors include mem-bers with extremist views (Anyone with investments might like to consider Fink's attitude when deaading whether or not to allow BlackRock to manage their investments)

Fink isn't quite alone in his determination to take over the world, of course Michael Bloomberg, another extremely arrogant fellow, and a man who runs a financial media company which provides news for most of corporate Amer-ica, seems to have simtlar atms, and both men could not unreasonably be de-scribed as berng egotistical, narcissistic and megalomaniacal Two men with but one Napoleon complex Another man with simular enthusiasms, Doctoroff, is Bloomberg's media boss And some, at least, of these views seem to be shared by Hank Paulson, a former boss of Goldman Sachs and Tom Steyer, a hedge fund bilhonaire

Bloomberg ts also much convinced by the fake climate change industry and has provided free prosecutors to sue energy companies if he doesn't hke them

By pushing their propaganda very widely, these people have massive influ-ence on climate scrence researchers and they influence the multi billion dollar a year climate mdustry

Sadly for Fink and Bloomberg, a growing number of experts are prepared to speak out and tell the truth about subjects such as climate change Dodgy science published by climate advocacy groups is certainly not uncommon,’ said Roger Pielke, a Professor at Umversity of Colorado And Warren Buffett, the leg endary mnvestor has also expressed scepticism The evidence shows that the: illogical obsession with Net Zero will lead to bilhons of deaths from disease, star vation and other preventable problems

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Starvation 1s hbemg createa quite aeuperately as part or tne pian to reduce the world’s population

Encouraged by cultrst-controlled politicians, vast quantities of the world's crops of corn, soy bean and so on, are being used to make biofuels so that motorists can continue to buy cheap petrol for ther motor cars A while ago, a hst of 51 things you and | can do to prevent global warming was published Number 1 on their list was headed 'Turn food into fuel' This, 1t was claimed, would have a'high umpact' on the global warming problem It was suggested that ethanol is the alternative fuel that 'could finally wean the US from its expensive oi] habit and mm turn prevent the muthons of tons of carbon emissions that go with it'

This 1s dangerous nonsense When more land 1s used to grow biofuels, so that 'green' motonsts can dnve around feeling virtuous, there is less land for growing food and an increase in the number of people starving to death

The demand for biofuels has been soaring for years (despite the knowledge that, as a result, people are starving) and the increased use of biofuel 1s a major force behind the rise of food prices If greens keep promoting biofuels then there is going to be a global shortage of food and millions are going to die as a result

There are other problerns with our food supplies, of course
Big American seed companies have been busy patenting the rights to many

individual seeds They have done this so that they can force farmers around the world to buy their products One result has been that small farmers im India are no longer allowed to grow seeds from crops that their famibes have been planting for generations If they do, then lawyers for American multinationals will smother them with writs and injunctions

Asa result, the tncidence of suicide among small farmers in developing countnesis ternfyingly high

Finally, large modern farms are remarkably (and surpnsingiy) mefficient
When the fuel used to build tractors, make fertilisers and pesticides and so on 1s taken into account, it turns out that the energy cost of a kilogram of corn has actually risen tn the last few decades Soil erosion, the loss of poli:mators (such as bees) who have been killed by chemicals, evolving chemical resistance by pests and numerous other environmental problems have also reduced farm crops

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The result of all this 1s that food 1s becoming scarce and prices are nsing
This ts not a cyclical change {with pnces falling or msing due to changes in the weather) Itis a structural change and tt1ts, I fear, permanent

As far as food prices are concerned, the conditions really are optimum for a 'perfect storm' At first glance it appears that things really couldn't get much worse

But, actually, they could.
American genetic engineers have been 'modifying food for years to make it

more profitable No one knows what effect their modifications will have on the safety of food for human consumption No one knows what other horrendous side effects there might be The msks are unbekevably dangerous So, for example, if every farmer in the world grows the same ‘brand’ of potato and that potato 1s hit by a deadly disease then there won't be any potatoes

For those in Europe and America all this ts not yet critical
But for those in many other parts of the world this 1s already an outright

disaster In some countries nearly half of all children are malnourished And things are getting worse and will continue to get worse Rising prices and falling quantities of food available for eating {as opposed to filhng petrol tanks) will result in massive starvation around the world The fake coronavirus hoax, and the consequent economic problems which will devastate economies everywhere, will exacerbate the problem Asa result, the incidence of global starvation is set to rocket

It’s no good saying that the planet isn’t overcrowded (it isn't) or that there 1s plenty of food (there 1s), for the mescapable fact 1s that as a result of policies controlled by internatronal organisations controlled by the United States of America, at least five million tnfants and small children che each year ~ tn a good year That figure ts set to rocket in India, Nigeria and the Congo and elsewhere The number of people in extreme poverty around the world could soon double to over 200 million

Increasing agricultural production enabled the world to grow from 1 7 billion people to nearly 7 billion people in just a century But when the oil runs out, the world will not be able to feed that many people The oil is needed for farming as well as for transport

The racist and elitist policies of the climate change enthusiasts who want us to stop using oil will, if they are successful, be responstble for billions of deaths

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The billzonatres assume that they know best about everythmg (because they are rich) and that the end always justifies the means Their arrogance has also helped them become ever richer In the last two decades billions of dollars have moved from the middle classes to the bilionaire classes Real wages have been falling and the value of savings, investments and pensions has fallen steadily while the billonazres such as Fink and Bloomberg have got ever richer It 1s difficult to avoid the feeling that Fink and Bloomberg have for years now been ona very effective mission to destroy American from within

The unavoidable truth is that everything needs energy and without energy everything stops The climate change believers have pushed energy costs ever higher and if they are able to understand even the simplest scientific evidence, they must know that renewables will never replace carbon based fuels However, it ts largely thanks to the efforts of Fmk, Bloomberg and thei billionaure colleagues that capital spending on fossil fuels has fallen dramatically and fuel production has dropped 30% since 2020

27
The wilful destruction of pensions through absurd political shenanigans, the monstrous nonsenses known as diversity and sustainability, the rise in the power of the central banks and the Bank for International Settlements are all closely linked, all carefully designed, and all have exactly the same long-term aim a World Government anda global population of serfs (with the World Gov ernment almost certarn to have its parliament burlding in Israel which may be one of the most unstable and aggressive countmes on earth but which 1s also the physical or spiritual home of many of those leading the demand for a Great Reset and a World Government controlled by and for bankers and billionaires) Incidentally, cvil servants and those with publicly funded pensions might think that their rehrement.is well-funded because they have been promised good pensions I'm afraid that they are deluding themselves No pubhcly funded pension is safe

28
The ilhteran, the truth deniers, the conspirators and the collaborators have in-

vented a language of therr own By looking for their favourite words you can easiy .dentify the conspiratorial globalists

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And so here are their favourite words If you see more than two of these words Inany document then you know you are dealing with a conspirator You should be aware and wary

Collaboration The conspirators love to pretend that they are part of a big, happy famuly of mndividuals who have seen they are ight In fact, of course, they are collaborators in the way that thugs who set fire to a tramp 1n the street are collaborators

Sustainable This is probably their favourite word They can't usually manage a paragraph without using it atleast once Everything has to be sustainable

Resilient They use this word a good deal when talking about risk management

Leadership The collaborators hke to think that they all have leadership qualities They don't have any leadership qualities, of course, and so they use the word a good deal when describing themselves and thetr colleagues The words 'common purpose' are also popular among those who consider they are following the 'play book' (The tlliterat: are also very keen on 'toolkits' and 'group think' though none of them has the fogpiest what these mean.)

Impact They use this word to show the effect of one of their social engineering programmes

Demter They use this word to describe anyone who does not share thetr insanity Itis used as aterm of abuse If theycall you a denier you should be proud

Inclusive The collaborators love to feel that they are inclusive They are fans of forced homogenisation They believe mn mixed loos and mixed sports teams because these are a true sign of inclusivity They hke to subordinate mdividual rights to the nghts of the community

Equity The conspirators are huge fans of the redistribution of resources - as long as they get more of whatever there is than anyone else It ts through their enthusiasm for ‘equity’ that the collaborators show their allegiance to the com-mumnist cause They also lke to move towards the standardisation of everything

Diversity They love this word even more than they love the concept. Every-thing must be diverse They beheve tn the deliberate and steadfast disruption of what they call ‘organte patterns of association’ If you want to imitate one of the globalists just talk about diversity and sustainability

Transparency The globalists are firm behevers in transparency when it comes to other people They are, for example, enthusiastic supporters of ‘track

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and trace’ But they are not as keen about transparency when it comes to them selves and their own dirty deeds

The conspirators and collaborators are also desperately enthusiastic about accountability as far as it relates to other people They always like to create per-manent digital records of everything other people do They msist that everyone (except themselves) should be accountable for their actions They themselves steadfastly refuse to debate the value of what they do

Innovative They love thts word because it makes them seem orginal and creative Sadly, of course, none of them has ever had a single original or creative thought They prefer to follow the playbook devised by Schwab and the other leaders of the Nutter Movement They talk a good deal about the Fourth Indus-tnal Revolution because this makes them sound like mtellectuals. (Naturally, most of them have noidea what it means and didn't even know there were three other industrial revolutions until last week)

There are other words to look out for, of course Words such as 'predictive’ ‘profiling’ and standardisation’ invartably crop up at least once in every docu-ment they produce And remember too, of course, that the ilhterati who beheve mn global warming and the Great Reset regard a document of 500 pages as a short note

The battle between individualism (the essence of humanity and freedom) and collectivism is vast and contnumsg The collectivists are enthusiastic promoters

of mass vaccination programmes which are offered not to protect individuals but to protect communities, with no scientific evidence that they do either and much evidence that they do lasting harm We are being moved towards a four day week (at most), job sharing, working from home (guaranteed to reduce pro-

ductivity) and, as jobs become scarce and people decide they don't want them any way, a State paid for, State sponsored, State selected universal basic income Everything that is being done to oppress and suppress us is promoted and protected by, it seerns, all the world's lobbyists, pressure groups and self-appotnted fact checkers

30
The quickest and eastest way to become mch these days is to set up a fact checking company You can easily persuade huge companies to hire you to 'fact

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check' anyone telling the truth | have investigated a number of fact checkers specialising in scientific matters and found that none of them had any relevant qualifications and all of the ones I found merely labelled anything which contradicted the conspirators' official line as 'fake news'

Describing yourself as a 'fact checker' is one of the quickest way toriches these days because there are many large organisations which are ever eager to hire fact checkers and are, seemingly, unconcerned about the qualhfications (or lack of) of the individuals concerned I decided that the word 'deception' is the collective term for fact checkers as in 'a deception of fact checkers'

One of the fact checkers I encountered (by accident rather than design) was someone called Dave who edited a website called Media Bias Fact Check Dave described his site as 'the most comprehensive media bias resource on the internet' He clarmed to have five volunteers to help him and admitted that none of his teatn was a professional journalist Dave said he 'currently works full time in the health care industry' though he didn't say whether he was a bratn surgeon or a hospital car park attendant or a drug company sales representative He described himself as an armchair researcher and boasted that his website had been used as a resource by BBC News, among many other media organisations

I found that like most fact checkers, Dave was quick to describe videos and articles as 'FALSE' (fact checkers always put that word im capital letters, as though it has more gravitas that way) or as contaiming 'misinformation', even though everything mn a video or article had been thoroughly and professionally researched

When I examined his fact-checking site, Dave appeared to have based his judgement on matenal which appeared on a site called Politifact which itself contains errors They said I had a Facebook video But I have never had a Facebook account They said that m 2019 I authored a book aimed at discrediting trustin vaccmes That's not true either (The only book on vaccines which | have written was published m 2011 andit was aimed at providing readers with facts) They report that there is no clear evidence that the coronavirus vaccines have killed or will kill anyone I don't thinkI'm the only doctor in the world to disagree with that Indeed, how can anyone write that a drug will never kill anyone?

Another fact checker claims they wrote to me c/o the emazl address on my website There ts no email address on my website

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Dave didn’t lkke another video of mine called ‘Doctors and Nurses giving the covid 19 vaccine will be tried as war cnmuinals' He iabelled that one FALSE, based on yet another fact checker called Lead Stones

The problem with that judgement is that the exghth word of the title of the video 1s ‘wall’, suggesting that something is going to happen in the future It1s, of course, tmpossible to label such a judgement as false unless you have direct access to the future

31
Progress in terms of people getting richer relies on productivity going up but the opposite has happened in recent years Inflation, soaring taxes, lockdown mentalty, working from home and other factors are pushing people into giving up indespair Milhons now choose to hve on benefits, retire and take their pension early, or choose to be classified as long term sick and give up work for the rest of their lives In the UK there are, as] write in the summer of 2023, four or five mullton people classtfied as long term sick - people who are officially allowed to remain off work for the rest of their lives (Precise figures are always difficult to obtain from governments but when figures are offered they are invariably massively underestimated)

32
By the summer of 2023 there was some belated discussion in the press about whether lockdowns had helped prevent the spread of covid. In fact there is no doubt that the lockdowns made the situation considerably worse and were responsible, as I predicted when they were first rntroduced, for hundreds of thousands of deaths

What is 1gnored, however, ts that the lockdowns were not introduced to stop the spread of covid 19 The lockdowns were introduced as a form of comphance traring Their subsidiary arm was to make people so lonely and despairing that would be ready to grab at any solution And the solution, of course, was the toxic and experimental covid-19 vaccination

33
The innocent and the narve beheve that everythme is happening by accident Farmers around the world seem constantly bewildered and confused by pohctes and decisions which are designed to please the enthusiasts, calling for the

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closure of farms 1n order to appease the psychopaths calling for net zero In an artucle in a Bntish magazine {which, like others, seems to have fallen for the Green myths with all the mindless commitment of a teenager 1n love) one leading Green academic recently said 'Farming has no option - 1t will have to be sustainable otherwise it will not be sustained’ and there were doubtless many Green heads nodding though I confess I was merely left puzzied

Confused farmers descnbe new government policies as vindictive, senseless, cruel, destructive, insane, bureaucratic, dangerous and just plain bewildering Farmers are encouraged to follow ‘biodynamic’ farming methods whereby herbal and mineral preparations are used together with an astronomical calendar to guide sowing and harvesting dates (I’m not kidding) Nowhere 1s there more mcomprehensive jargon than there now 1s intruding into the world of farming Many farmers have been pressured into supporting the absurd re-wild-Ing programme which is promoted with such enthusiasm by the climate change believers The conspsrators’ plan ts to reduce the amount of land available for growme food in order to create food shortages, starvation and a consequent, inevitable reduction im the size of the global population The aim is to allow between a third and a half of all land to go wild. Even parks are being allowed to grow wild, and gardeners are encouraged to let their grass grow throughout the summer Re-wilding is leading to grass being left long and uncut on verges, in public places and private gardens

So what's the underlying reason? (They always have a reason) Well, long and uncut grass will dramatically increase the spread of ticks and the incidence of Lyme Disease It will also increase the number of people bitten by adders If you don’t see an adder and you tread on it then it will probably bite you And all that long grass will dramatically tncrease the amount of hay-fever Plus, long, uncut grass on road verges and traffic islands makes road accidents far more likely Re wilding 1s part of the plan to make everyone miserable, ruin everyone's health, make money for the drug companies and killa few people

In order to ensure that neither farmers nor members of the public encroach on land which has been set aside for rewilding (and the first re-wilding programme was introduced by the European Union some years ago in a scheme which was called ‘set aside’) wild animals are bemg released In England, for example, bison, water buffalo, wid boar and beavers have been mtroduced with predictably disastrous results The naive assume that if land 1s left uncared for, fields will become wild flower meadows, full of daisies, tulips, forget-me-nots,

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snapdragons, violets and other wonderful dehghts In reality, of course, fields which are abandoned to the re-wilding scheme simply become a chaotic and unpleasant mixture of nettles, brambles, dock and grant hogweed with outbreaks of Japanese knotweed growing rapidly over the years to come

Today, most farmers see their problems occurring as a result of stupidity, ignorance or a failure to understand ther needs But whatis happening to them 1s nothing to do with stupidity, .gnorance or a failure to understand —1t’s all deliberate and quite cold blooded. More and more European countries are now dependent on imports for most of their food and energy supphes

The bottorn line, vital to remember, is that nothing is happening by accident or by comeidence

The same things are happening im all industnes and all professions but be cause people tend to see only their own small area of activity most don’t realise

that their confusion, their own horror story, 1s part of a wider pattern that affects all industries, most professions and all nations The patient who spends two years on a waiting list for surgery is suffering (and probably unable to work) not by accident but by design The traveller whose journey 1s disrupted by delays and strikes is suffering because of planned delays and well-orgamised strikes The parents whose child is not being properly educated should understand that the educational system tsn't failing by accident but by design We all need to see everything that is happening as a part of a plan, rather than as a senes of isolated incidents My purpose in writing this book is to put everything in context and to enable the reader to see things 1n perspective, and later mm the book I will explain how we got here and whois responsible There is a greater plan, the plan for the Great Reset, and it ts being executed with military precision

34

And then, inevitably, came the designer war, ostensibly between Russia and Ukraime but in reahty between America and its NATO satelhtes and Russia.

It is clear that President Putin didn't want to sell his country to the American juggernaut, driven by the conspirators, and that was enough to mark him as an enemy It also seems clear that NATO and Russia were involved in a battle to decide which of them would control the world government which both of them are expecting NATO and Russia were playing a massive game of Monopoly, with the prize being control of much of the world's resources rather than the rent ona few

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wooden houses and the penalty being almost complete annthilation rather than a request to pay £200 to the bank and an instruction not to go past 'GO'

Everything bad that happens has been deliberately organised by American politicians and bankers What we are seeing now is a culmination of a process which started well over 100 years ago and is now rapidly approaching fulfil ment We now live m a world where bankers, who produce nothing, who are of no real value to society and who unquestionably do far more harm than good, control the worlds money

35

Today's problems aren't caused by the fact that 1% of the population controls most of the world's property and wealth but by the fact that the 99% are, through their mortgages and bank loans, in debt to the 1% and many will spend thetr lives working to pay off those mortgages or loans and, at the end of their lives, end up no richer than they were to start with The 1% (or, in fact, considerably less than 1% but J'll stick to calling them the 1% because tt's a simple way to describe them) have taken control of the 99% because, to put it bluntly, they ownthem The 1% has sucked the world dry of money They control everything They control natural resources, they control finance, they controi the politicians, they control the judiciary, they control the police, they control health care and they control the military Globally, they have virtually total control over organisations such as the United Nations (and its subsidianes such as the World Health Organisation), the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund Any dissent that appears at the topis contrived and artifictal. The 1%, the conspirators,

may sometimes appear to be at war with a government or an administrative body or an NGO but they are never at war with anything or anyone because they control everything and everyone The 1% controls the protestors Black Lives Matter, clymate change groups and mobs smashing store windows are all financed by the billionaire financiers

36
Nothing ts at it appears to be and nothing, for sure, is as the media would have us beheve Everything you read, see or hear courtesy of the mainstream media 1s alie For example, the mamstream media around the world insisted that Russia had destroyed its own Nord Stream pipeline even though there was exceilent ev idence that the pipeline had been destroyed by the Americans - whose president

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had, indeed, boasted that the pipeline would be destroyed There was of course no logical reason for the Russians to destroy an enormously expensive pipeline, and if they d wanted to stop the flow of gas to Germany they could have merely turned off the supply When the Kakhovskaya hydroelectric dam was destroyed, the BBC's first reaction was to blame the Russians, even though there was, once

again, no logical reason why the Russians should destroy a dam which was providing water for much of Cnmea and was essential for the functioning and safety of their own nuclear power station Moreover the area beneath the dam-aged dam was largely occupied by Russians All the evidence showed that it was Ukrarne which benefited from the dam's destruction Even after Russia had ac-cused Ukraine of destroying the dam, the mainstream media continued to blame Russia, with most mainstream outlets refusing even to mention the far more likely possibility

Modern, Western societies were originally designed to stop anyone taking control The legislative branch of government was kept separate from the other branches simply so that all the power would not bein the hands of the few But the 1% has changed ail that Moreover, the 1% has achieved this position srmply by manipulating the money and by using the money to control the pohticians I wonder how many people know, for example, that after the banking collapse of 2008, which started tn the US and became global, it was American President Obama who decided not to prosecute any of the bankers who had created the crash It was President Obama, a Democrat ostensibly representing the ordinary men and women of America, who defended the bankers, who insisted that the millions of people who lost their homes should not be bailed out and who ar-ranged for bankers such as Goldman Sachs and J P Morgan to be batled out with billions of dollars of taxpayers' money Furthermore, it was Prestdent Obama who allowed the bankers to use the bail-outs to give themselves huge bonuses And yet the mass of people still revere Obama, the great betrayer, and regard him asa hero (The banks were presumably grateful and it 1s, of course, merely a co-incidence that former President Obama became strangely wealthy after his term as President came to anend)

37
Democracy (once described as the tyranny of the majority and abhorred by

Socrates, Plato and Anstotle) has, hke much else, been weapomsed and a new breed of woke tndividuals (who believe they are exhibiting compassion which,

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in truth, they neither feel nor understand) show a sense of reverence for the spiritual trammungs of the State that marks them out as being indistrnguishable from the brain-washed followers of Mao Tse Tung. They are just as blind to truth, decency and respect as the commutted followers of any dictator in any totalitar-1an regime must be

All these things, and many more, were and are connected by a long-running conspiracy of bankers, polrtiicians and assorted billionaires, a long running, deep seated conspiracy which this book exposes and defines in great depth and detaal

Today, there ts an understandable inclination to regard the fake coronavirus pandemic that was used to bring in lockdowns, social distancing, mask wearing and pseudo-vaccines, as the start of the troubles which are destroying our world and taking away all vestiges of our freedom and humanity

But all that has been nothing more than an exercise m compliance traimmg designed to ternfy, to subdue and to force billions to forget everything they know, to ignore all truths, however blatant, to set aside all natural suspicions, and to becorne obedient serfs What has been happening 1n the last three years (the fake plague, the nonsense of net zero and all the accompanying restrictions, the beginning of World War III) is merely the culmination of something that started many decades ago

Everything ts hotting up because the conspirators, the very few men and women who are behind everything that is happening, can smell the fear and taste the blood, they know that the mass of people are broken and can easily be controlled They know too that this 1s their moment, 1f they pause or hes1-tate then they are lost and it will be decades, at least, before they have another chance

When we are afraid we do not think properly and when the fear becomes chronic our ability to think clearly is suspended more or less permanently We have been manipulated and groomed for decades, trained to be fearful The threat of the nuclear bomb, a range of threatened infectious diseases (starting with the wildly exaggerated threat of AIDS), constant wars around the globe, the madness of the wildly exaggerated threats that the world will end in five years, ten years, fifteen years or whatever because of the non-existent threat of non-existent clyumate change, endless over-promoted distractions, accusations of racism, sexism and so on — all these have created fear, depression and increas-tng despair Just as Carl Jung had predicted, the State has taken the place of God

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The conspirators know that people m fear need and demand someone to take

controL Adults become like children, requiring authority and tolerating surveullance that would otherwise be regarded as intrusive People become ready to sneak and snitch on their fellows The most absurd instructions are followed without question And so, because of the threat of an rmapinatively marketed flu, the elderly were locked in care homes for years, and relatives were only allowed to see them through glass Vaccination programmes were promoted with bizarre incentives (in America it was possible to win $5 mullion if you agreed to be vaccinated, and free beer and free doughnuts were given to those who had been jabbed) Celebrities offered abuse to those who questioned the need for the vaccrnation programme The Queen of England and the rest of her famuy exhorted everyone to be jabbed The Archbishop of Canterbury promised that those who were jabbed would be loved by Jesus (and, presumably, those who didn t get vaceinated wouldn’t be loved) The BBC told the public that the covid-19 vaccine was safe and effective - though the medical evidence at the time showed clearly that the vaccine was neither of these things and the assurances were offered without any scientific background

The truth ts that the vaccine damages 1mmune systems, making those who have had it more hkely to catch (and die from) other infections And will the covid-19 jab affect the fertility of those who had it? It seems very likely Cancer tates are rising rapidly among those who agreed to be vaccinated It was clear in the autumn of 2020 that the covid 19 jab would be neither safe nor effective, and today there 1s now no doubt the covid jabis a killer, fake vaceme - useless but far more dangerous than depleted uranium shells or cluster bombs Like bombs, rockets and bullets, its only concervable purpose ts ta kill people

The evidence showing that the over-promoted, over-sold covid-19 jab ts the most dangerous pharmaceutical product ever used is denied only by fools or shills for the conspirators and the drug industry | have repeatedly warned that the covid jab can and does cause or exacerbate a huge range of serious health problems - including heart disease, clotting problerns and cancer And as 1 warmed in 2020, the 1mmune system problems caused by the 'vaccine’ are deadly

The evidence suggesting that the covid vaccine ts toxic 1s overwhelming and should be banned ts constantly growig Any other product known to cause such severe problems would have been taken off the market a long hme ago

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A review of 325 autopsies on pattents who died after covid vaccination showed that 74% of the deaths were caused by the covid vaccine

The nine eminent authors of the paper found that the organ systems most likely to be involved in covid jab deaths were cardiovascular system, haematological systern and respiratory systemrm The mean time between vaccination to death was 14 3 days A total of 240 deaths out of the 325 deaths were independently adjudicated as directly due to or significantly contributed to by covid-19 vaccinations

The nine authors concluded ‘The consistency seen among cases in this

review with known covid-19 vacetne adverse effects, their mechanisms and related excess deaths, coupled with autopsy confirmation and physician-led death adjudication, suggests there 1s a high hkehhood of a causal bnk between covid 19 vaccines and death m most cases Further urgent mvestigation is required for the purpose of clarifying our findings

Then there was the paper which appeared tn the British Journal of General Practice recently which showed that 'enlargement of axillary, supraclavicular or cervical lymph nodes following vaccination with covid 19 mRNA vaccines 1s more frequent than inittally reported, with a rate reaching up to 16% following the second dose of the Moderna mRNA vaccine' The paper also reported that a few cases of lymphoma were reported in the literature

The authors warned that doctors in charge of patients with post-vaccination lymphadenopathy should be reminded to consider the possibility of an underly ing or comadental makgnant disorder The truth, of course, 1s that there aren't enough doctors around to check fully 16% of all the patients wha have a second dose of that vaccine

The covid jab is causing one problem after another And the problems are ignored or suppressed by the medical estabhkshment

In July 2023, 1 showed that the covid-19 jab was responsible for a surge in type 1 diabetes among children and teenagers

A survey of 38,000 young people (reported im the Journal of the American Medtcal Assocratron) showed that the nse is substantial

I warned that this would happen back in 2020 I warned that the covid-19 jab would push up blood sugar levels

The epidemic of type 1 diabetes ts caused by the covid-19 vaccime And the drug companies will now get ever richer selling treatments for diseases the drug compantes caused

Tea 3 riers bebe nt seek 46%:

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Everywhere you look there 1s evidence proving that the covid jab was a koller In less than two and a half years nearly 2,000 healthy athletes have had heart attacks or sudden serious health problerns - with over 1,300 of them dying

And yet, in the summer of 2023, the medical establishment, bought with drug company money, was still refusing even to conternplate the idea that the deaths may be caused by their beloved vaccine They didn't dare admit thatthe medical profession was responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths because they were terrified of the inevitable lawsuits not to mention the professional embarrassment

It was clear that doctors who gave the covid jab without properly assessing the dangers were going to be on the wrong end of the world's most expensive

class action lawsuit

But the vaccines have not been withdrawn No one in the drug companies or the medical establishment tssued grovelling apologies

Instead, as had happened for over three years, the doctors who were exposing the dangers of the covid-19 jab were being harassed, banned and censored.

Any doctor who was shill g»ving the covid-jab had shown themselves to be a dangerous fool who should be struck off the medical register for life and arrested immediately for attempted murder

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It ts, of course, possrble to trace the plan to control the world back hundreds of years

In The Repubitc, Plato recommended creating asuper-state headed by philoso pher-kings Charlemagne wanted the world, and not just Europe, and who knows where Napoleon’s ambitions would have ended Thomas More wanted Utopia and Alfred Lord Tennyson wanted much the same H G Wells took tame off from wmnting excellent novels to toy with the idea of a global super-state

Those planning the conspiracy have always had a long-term pian but they also Knew that they would, in their lifetimes, benefit enormously from their conspiracy

The conspirators may think of legacies and dynasties but although they like nothing move than to be described as philanthropists, they are not individuals who think much of the concept known as altruusm The conspirators are men and women who beheve very firmly that charity begins at home The conspira tors do not do things just because they are the ‘right things’ to do If they make

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a donation to a college or a hospital or a foundation of some kind they msist that the reciprents put their name on a building, a scholarship or some other memiortal If they have a foundation then they will find a way to benefit from the foundation's tax-free status These are people who, by and large, know that they cannot be rmmortahsed in statue form, because everyone who saw the statue

would say ‘Who the devil was he’, and so they force themselves onto the future ina more modern, practical way

39
All the events I have deseribed so far are linked in which can best, and most appropniately, be described as global terrorism on a scale never previously seen — let alone rmagined

Now it’s tme for some explanations and some revelations
It’s time to go back over twocenturies to the end of the 1 8th century when the

House of Rothschild was operating in Europe and when they created the basis of thetr wealth by financing wars

The Rothschilds didn't finance one side in a war They didn't give financial help to governments, kings or leaders of whom they approved, they financed both sides In wars they financed all the armmes tnvolved and made profits from everyone During the 19th century, wars led (as wars always do) to arebalanemng of power And at the heart of the power sharing sat the Rothschilds

The founder of the dynasty, Meyer Amschel Rothschid, who operated out of Frankfurt mn Germany, was a crafty and rather greedy man who had five sons, four of whom he sent to various parts of Europe to orgamse financing in England, France, Austria and Italy The fifth son stayed in Germany

It has been satd that the Rothschilds weren't merely profiteering but were behind all the wars in Europe in that time Millions of people dred so that the Rothschilds could become rich. And with their wealth came power

How did thts bunch of crooks make ther money?
Simple
Wars cost money, lots of money, and the Rothschilds were always there with

bags of gold to pay for soldiers and guns and ammunition Whenever there was a battle there was always one certain winner the Rothschilds They lied, and deceived and tricked ther way to becoming international bankers And, of course, to becoming incredibly wealthy They got nch by lending money to all the politicians and all the kings and charging them huge amounts of interest

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In the American Civil War, the Rothschilds helped finance both sides I wonder how many Amencan children hear about that in ther history lessons

Wars cost huge amounts of money and in the end, of course, it is a country's taxpayers who have to find the cash Financiers like lending money to governments because they know that they can charge a high rate of interest, they know that they will almost certainly get ther money back and they know that ifa gov ernment owes them money they will probably be able to do advantageous deals giving them monopolies, and the freedom to exploit natural resources such as areas containing orl or metals

This way of working was gradually copied by other bankers, and by the 21st century it was become clear to anyone who looked that when US troops stayed In a country after an invasion, they weren't there to help but to steal natural resources (Examples included Iraq, Libya and Syna) The American style was to create a war between two sides, send in troops to help whichever side they thought most sympathetic to the American cause (or whichever side had the best natural resources or wealth) and then steal whatever natural resources (oul,

gold, other mimerals, antiquihes or money) which the country had
Today, no one likes to say much about the Rothschilds for one simple reason

they were Jewish And organisations such as the Anti-Defamation League have always regarded any attack on Jewish bankers as berng anti-Semitic Acadernics, authors and journalists are always careful about mentioning the role Jewish bankers have played in the development of what 1s without doubt a global conspiracy because of the danger of being classified, and attacked, as anti-Semitic This ts, of course, absolute nonsense Drawing attention to the actions of the Rothschilds and other Jewtsh bankers has nothing whatsoever to do with the Jewish people as a whole But for the consptrators tt 1s convenient, quick and effective to use the anti-Semitic insult as a defence weapon to silence historians and honest commentators

In fact, Jews should be as angry as anyone about the actions of the Jewish bankers In World War IT for example, the Warburgs, a Jewish banking family, helped to finance Adolf Hitler and the National Socialist Party If you want to know more about the role of the Warburgs take a look at Zina Cohen's The Shocking History of the EU

Newly minted mternatronal bankers {such as the Rothschilds) didn't just make vast amounts of money out of wars and governments, they also acquired extraordinary amounts of power So, forexample, governments gave the bankers

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the night to form central banks The Bank of France, the Bank of Germany, the Bank of England and, 1n America, the Federal Reserve were set up not by governments but by bankers with their own interests at heart

The story of how the Federal Reserve was created is extraordinary A bunch of leading American bankers took 4 trip to Jekyll Island in Georgia and created America's central bank in secret The story of this chicanery 1s told in G Edward Griffin's 600-page book The Creature from fekyll Island A Second Look at the Federal Reserve The bankers were aided in obtaining control of America's money by a man called Colonel Edward Mandel House who was English and no more a colonel than Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis Presley's manager Colonel House was a behind-the-scenes fixer who wrote about establishing 'socialism as dreamed by Karl Marx' in America and who wanted a central bank which could provide flexable, inflatable paper currency and a graduated income tax House was said by some to be more powerful than President Woodrow Wilson and this does not seem at all far-fetched With House running the economy, America's national debt expanded by 300 per cent

In an attempt to disguise their perfidy some of the bankers behind the plan for the Federal Reserve pretended to oppose it New laws were passed which appeared to control the bankers but which actually gave them more money and more power

A similar system has been operated by the European Union for decades The eurocrats who create the EU's laws appear to be defending ordinary people by devising yet more laws and regulations to control banks and busmmesses In reality, the laws and regulations are introduced at the behest of lobbyists working on behalf of big banks and big internatronal companies and they are part of the plan

to create a global financial system, a global currency and a global government The powerful men and women who pay the lobbyists (not all of them bankers or financiers) know that the rules and regulations will make 1t impossible for new companies (and banks) to get started in business Large companies, on the other hand, will ensure that the EU creates laws which don't actually affect their earnings And, of course, they will hire huge departments full of specialists who can use the new legislation to their advantage All this is aided by the fact that there is an easy movement of staff between the EU and the large compamies the EU ts supposed to regulate There has never been as corrupt an organisation as the European Union Back in 1995, Bran Freemantle wrote an astonishing and revealing book calied The Octopus about corruption in Europe My own more re-

cent book OFPIS contaims revelations which | still find astonishing It 1s not surprising that the media and the British crvil servants are strong supporters of the EU since they are all strong advocates of a world government and all that goes with it

The real soctahsts, and the real communists, who welcomed the way the

bankers appeared to be working (and the central banks they created) had no idea that they were beng manipulated and controlled by very nch, very crafty, men whose plan, even then, was a world government which they would control

And those who were surprised that rich bankers should support the idea of a progressive income tax did not realise that the bankers (and their rich friends) would not be paying the tax for they would use foundations, trusts and offshore tax shelters to protect then wealth And so individual bankers actually owned ther countnes' central banks and had the power to create money and control those countries and their populations [t was Lenin who said that establishing a central bank was 90% of turning a country into a communist country and, indeed, having a central bank 1s one of the ten requirements hsted in The Communist Mamfesto It isn't surprising that Thomas Jefferson wrote that 'banking establishments are more dangerous than standing armies'

Even after the Bank of England and the Bank of France were theoretically brought under political control (and 'socialised') the bankers who had originally been the owners retained power over them Montagu Norman, the longest serving Governor of the Bank of England (he held the post from 1920 to 1944) was described by the Wall Street Journal as 'the currency dictator of Europe' Norman, wha was by any standards a 'bad' man, boasted 'I hold the hegemony of the world In 1942, Norman was quoted as saying that 'the hegemony of world finance should reign supreme over everyone, everywhere, as one whole supernational control mechanism'

Today, the central banks have enormous power In the US, the Federal Reserve controls interest rates and the money supply and can, therefore, decide whether there is going to be a recesston or a boom It ts the Federal Reserve that decides what happens to share prices and it ts the Federal Reserve which decides whether Americans have to deal with inflation or deflation The plan behind the

formation of the Federal Reserve was always a sumple one to enable billionaires to pretend to mtroduce a socialist state, a workers' democracy, so that they could control the country and become dictators

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The bankers had also realised that if they created artificial panics they would have even more power and make even more money By scaring ordimary investors {and pushing thern into selling their shares, for example) they could make enormous profits And bankers have manipulated and controlled entire countrtes since the early years of the 20th century It was] P Morgan, the epony mous founder of one of the world's most powerful banks, who created panic mn order to ensure that the Federal Reserve was created It was Morgan who pushed the US into the Great War in order to protect loans he had made to the British Government Woodrow Wilson had been re-elected as President after promising to keep America out of what was seen as an exclusively European war But while Wilson was busy promising that America would not get mvolved m the war between England and Germany, Colonel House was forging an agreement with England to do just the opposite The men who had been at the Jekyll Island meet ing, and who had created the Federal Reserve, were keen to become tnvolved because many of them had lent money to England and were keen to ensure that their money was not lost. And, of course, there was plenty of opportunity for businessmen to make money out of the war Bernard Baruch alone fixed up government contracts worth tens of bilhons of dollars The mamstream media was told to switch from opposing entry into the war to saying that it was essential for Amertca to become mnvolved Authors Gary AHen and Larry Abraham reported that one British MP, Arthur Ponsonby, wrote that 'there must have been more deliberate lyingin the world from 1914 to 1918 than in any other period in the world's history'

Tragically, it now seems clear that the decision to push Amenica into the war did far more harm than good and it was certainly the beginning of America's long period of being :nvolved in wars between other countries (America has been at war with someone, somewhere pretty much since 1914 The bankers,

the financiers and the arms manufacturers need constant war)
Bankers and arms dealers made fortunes However, Winston Churchill noted

that everyone, everywhere would have been better off if the Americans had stayed out of the war He argued that peace would have been made with Germany, that there would have been no collapse in Russia leading te communism and no collapse in Italy leading to the rise of Mussolini andfascism Most rmportantly, perhaps, the Nazis would have never been able to take power in Germany if the Americans had stayed at home and a settlement had been agreed between England and Germany The negotiators at Versailles, who allegedly sorted out

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the peace settlement after WWI knew damned well that 1t was going to make

things worse rather than better And remember what happened to the Middle East and the attempt by T E Lawrence {Lawrence of Arabia) to provide the Arabs with a fair solution

Lord Curzon remarked that the Versailles treaty was 'not a peace treaty' He described it as 'sumply a break in hostilities' and he was, of course, absolutely correct in his assessment

Not long after the end of the Great War ('the war to end all wars' and not, then, of course, given a number) the American bankers were lending money to a German politician called Adolf Hitler And during the Second World War, American companies were providing the Nazis with essential supplies Moreover, even before the end of World War II, the msiders were carving up Europe and planning more wars

(Inetdentally, many Americans, particularly those wha lost loved ones 1n the Vietnam War, might be surprised to learn that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese received 85% of their arms from Russia and Soviet Bloc countries and that those suppliers were helped by Amerncan bankers and mdustnalsts Once again the conspirators in America were financing and equipping both sides of a war and providing the enemy with the bullets which were killing American soldiers The rules said that American companies couldn't sell 'strategic' weapons {such as guns) to the enemy, but they could sell the tools to make the guns The Vietnam War was fought without there having been a forma! declaration of war and so the financiers could not be arrested for treason.)

The end of the Great War provided the bankers, the fixers such as Colonet House and the other insiders with a real chance to set up a world government And so the League of Nations was created The problem was that everyone 1nvolved in the negotiations knew that everyone else present was cheating and lying and no one trusted anyone The Americans huffed and puffed and walked out and the proposed World Government fell apart

Not everyone mn America had given up, however
The ubtquitous Colonel House met with members of The Round Table and the

Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Council of Foreign Affairs Their plan was to try to work out a way to persuade the voters of Europe and America that they needed a world government to guarantee peace

Meanwhile, after J.P Morgan's death it was his bank which helped to finance the Revolution tn Russia

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More importantly, America and the West had manufactured an 'enemy', and governments had an excuse to spend billions on manufacturing arms to defend themselves

It was all horribly easy to organise
Between 1923 and 1929, the Federal Reserve increased the supply of dollars

by nearly two thirds At the same time the mainstream media promoted shares with tremendous enthusiasm and, as a result, the stock market soared A major stock market crash was planned in 1927 and the Federal Reserve Board worked with the heads of central banks tn Europe to make sure that everything went according to their plan What happened next 1s no secret Thousands of investors were ruined m the crash of 1929 The bankers got richer Many of them had sold 'short' and made fortunes out of the crash they'd helped create

And the same scenario ts repeated at irregular intervals
The bankers start a scare
The frightened investors sell their shares cheaply
The bankers buy the cheap shares and make a fortune They are never ptun-

ished mn any way for their dishonesty and greed (For example, rf you want a quick guide to the crash of 2008, I recommend the film The Big Short)

Alternatively, by starting a rumour that a specific company was in financial trouble, the bankers could start a panic, buy the shares sold by panicking investors and then make a fortune The bankers did that often too Except for artusts of one sort or another, very few people ever get extremely rich honestly Behind every great fortune there 1s a history of theft, deceit and chicanery The insiders who run countnes and start wars manage the markets, establish monopolies, control natural resources (such as oi] and essential minerals), fix prices, control the labour market and buy and sell politicians

And, of course, anyone exposing the truth will be dismissed as paranoid, con

demned as a conspiracy theorist and labelled discredited
This has been going on for well over a century And it1s stll happening today

Financial markets are regularly manipulated Central banks (which often appear to be run by incompetent people) force debts higher, play with interest rates in a way that destroys economies and push up inflation when it suits them and the big banks (When interest rates rose rapidly in the UK 1n 2023 and people with borrowings were paying 7% or more, savers were stil receiving less than 1% ininterest It was clear ts was profiteering, shylocking, and that the pian to impoverish everyone was being followed precisely) Recessions and depressions

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appear periodically as and when required The bankers, and the central bankers, know that only precious metals such as gold and silver hold ther value

4s Lord Curzon and Winston Churchill had both foreseen, the Great War was not the end of European hostilities In 1939, the Second World War began Hitler was helped by the Round Table Group since 1t was generally felt among the insiders that a Second World War would make it easier to start a world government with the bankers and other insiders running things, and the people of the world being turned into drones (For more about the financing of the Second World War I suggest that you read Zina Cohen's book The Shocking History of the EU)

As soon as the Second World War started (and years before America became myolved) the insiders inthe US set up a Committee on Post-War problems And it was this group of American crooks (aka Wall Street movers and shakers) who set up the United Nations with the plan that this would, at iast, lead to the development of their beloved world government The people involved in the formation of the United Nations included Nelson Rockefeller and aman called John] McCloy Nelson Rockefeller is well known but McCloy not so widely known

McCloy, a former president of the World Bank, had been a partner 1n a law firm which represented the American portion of German company IG Farben and subsequently acquired a reputation for having sympathy for the Nazis For example, early in the Second World War, McCloy used his influence to block attempts by Jewish organisations to persuade the US Air Force ta bomb Auschwitz because he knew how cmuctal the concentration camp was to German Industry It was known that 1t would have been easy for bombers to destroy the gas cham bers and key railway junctions but McCloy (who was, at the time, the Assistant Secretary of War) claimed that bombing Auschwitz might annoy the Germans and provoke them into vindictive actions Some found it difficult to understand precisely what ‘vindictive actions’ he hadin mind And it was McCloy’s actions after the end of the War which helped create the European Union

After the end of World War II, McCloy became US High Commissioner for West Germany In addition to releasing many industriahsts who had been sentenced to prison, he also arranged for Nazi camp doctors and SS officers to be released or to have their sentences substantially reduced

As soon as McCloy had arranged for their release, the executives from IG Farben quickly re-jomed German companies, with, for example, Schmutz joining the board of Deutsche Bank McCloy was never subjected to serious cnticism for any of his actions because he was obeying American instructions Although

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President Eisenhower had wanted to nd Germany of the influence of the Nazis, there were other powerful Americans who felt differently AHen Dulles, John Foster Dulles and General Patton all wanted the Germans to control Europe as a bulwark against the Soviet Union.

After the War, McCloy served as chairman of the Chase Manhattan Bank and the Ford Foundation (Thomas McKittrick also became a director of Chase Man hattan, a bank which had had strong inks with the Nazts dunng the War } McCloy also became chairman of the Council on Foreign Relations and an adviser to five American Presidents In 1963, McCloy, the man whe had worked with the manufacturer of the gas which had been used to murder millions of Jews and who had ordered the early release of some of Germany’s worst war criminals, was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President Lyndon B Johnson

It was entirely thanks to the efforts of people such as McCloy and McKittrick that Schmutz, Krupp and other war criminals (who were as responsible as Hitler, Himmler et al for the horrors of the Second Worid War, and the efficient brutal-

ity of the Naz: war machine) received no punishment at ali or the sort of pun ishment usually regarded as suntable for small tme motoring offenders It was released war criminals who helped found the European Union

Being much richer than Rudolf Hess, and having more powerful friends, Krupp, who had been sentenced to 12 years imprisonment at Nuremberg, was released by the Amenmcan McCloy after just three years in prison It 1s worth recording that Krupp's imprisonment does not sound much hke punishment A room in the prison was set aside so that the Knupp directors could discuss corporate business, and Krupp was supplied with the best food and wines available He apparently took delight n insulting the people who had been responsible for his incarceration Incredibly, McCloy even arranged for Krupp to be pardoned and his record as a war criminal expunged after his release

Krupp's industrial emprre had controlled slave labourers im 57 concentration camps and Krupp, who was also Hitler's Minster of Armament and War Production, was close to the German high command He was responsible for transferring factories from occupied territories to the German Reich He was one of the most evil members of the Nazi regime and was awarded medals by Hitler for keeping up production of arms through the use of slave labour

McCloy later explained his pardon for Krupp by claaming that the German was a‘playboy who had not had much responsibility In fact, Krupp had been very

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much a hands-on operator, and runnmg the compames had been entirely his responsibility Astonishingly, McCloy even ordered that all of Krupp's property, which had been confiscated after the War, be restored to him so that he suffered not at all After his release and pardon, Krupp, one of the richest and worst German war criminals, quickly became a seerningly 'respectable’ German citizen accepted by German society and playing an important part mn the ennching of Germany and the development of the European Union

It was McCloy who helped the Nazis set up the European Union after the end of World War II

And, of course, he was one of the Americans who helped to found the United Nations

The Communist Party instructed its members that ‘Great popular support and enthusiasm for the Umited Nations’ policies should be built up, well or ganised and fully articulate But it is also necessary to do more than that, The opposition must be rendered so impotent that it will be unable to gather any significant support in the Senate against the United Nations Charter and the treaties which will follow'

And so the Communist Party supported, endorsed and promoted an organisation (the United Nations) which had been set up by a bunch of American bankers

Naturally, the mainstream media managed to convince people that the new organisation was set up to promote world peace and most of those now promot mg its activities, and parroting the official line, do so without knowimg precisely what hes behind the propaganda Since tts formation, the goal of the United Nations has been to abolish all individual countries And American Presidents have remained loyal to that goal In 1992, President George Bush said ‘It 1s the sacred principles enshnned m the United Nations Charter to which the American people will henceforth pledge their allegiance ' Not, you will note, the American

flag
So, now we know where the United Nations came from
And, more mmportantly, we know that the United Nations was set up by

American bankers and the Commumst Party and its aim isto set up a world government This helps to explain the behaviour of the UN mm recent years All those individuals who thought that the UN was merely a kindly organisation set up to promote the sort of gentle world peace loved so much by Miss World contestants can think again

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Oh, and it 1s, of course, mmportant to remember that the World Heaith Organisation, the promoter of face masks and pseudo vaccines which are dangerous and don’t work, 1s a subsidiary of the Umted Nations

And now, to find out in more detail how we ended up in a nightmare world, read Part Three and I will explain exactly what has happened and why and who 1s responsible

But, before we get there, I have included a short interlude of Hhumination

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Part Two SHS RE c3 LELE

Interlude

T have collected the quotations which fallow during the last few years At first, I intended to sprinkle them throughout the text And then I thought I'd just leave them out But eventually, 1 decided to include them in a special section as a prelude to the next part of the book

‘The first thing that we ask of a writer 1s that he shan’t tell lies, that he shall say what he really thinks, what he really feels’ ~ George Orwell

'When you know the enemy’s plans, 1t will be easy to gam victory by means ofan appropniate response ’— Mryamoto Musashi

All warfareis based on deception To subdue the enemy without fighting 1s the acme of skill’ ~ Sun Tzu

Power isnotameans,itisanend The object of persecution 1s persecution The object of power is power '— George Orwell

‘The United Nations represents a potential threat of very great magnitude’ - Charles Lichtenstein (former US Ambassador to the United Nations)

‘The evidence is compelling that reconsideration of the world monetary system is overdue Therefore, national economies need monetary coordination mech anisms and that is why an integrated world economy needs a common mone- tary standard, whichis the best neutral inflationary coordinating device But,no national currency will do ~ only a world currency will work’ - President Ronald Reagan, 1983

‘Paper 1s likely to be abused, has been, 1s, and forever will be abused, in every country in which itis permitted - Thomas Jefferson, on fiat currencies

‘James Madison said ‘It 1s a universal truth that the loss of liberty at home 1s to be charged to the provisions against danger, real or pretended, fromabroad Fear of foreign peruis, Madison realised, can easily persuade a freedom-loving people to voluntanly part with liberties they would otherwise consider indispensable’ -Wilham] Watkins Jr

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‘Sometimes | wonder if the world 1s nin by smart people who are putting us on, or by rmbeciles who really mean it ’- Mark Twain

The first panacea for a mismanaged nation 1s inflation of the currency, the sec- ondis war Both bring atemporary prospenty, both bring a permanent ruin But both are the refuge of pohtical and economic opportumists '- Ernest Hemingway

‘Of course we can split genes The question ts can we not split genes '—Jean Paul Sartre

‘Give me four years to teach the children and the seed I have shown wiil never be uprooted ’-Vi Lenin

‘My Government 1s the world's leading purveyor of violence’ — Martin Luther King

(Politics) is all about sincenty If you can fake that, you've got it made’ - George Burns

‘News 1s what somebody somewhere wants to suppress, all the rest 1s advertis-

ing '— Lord Northelffe

'There 1s nosuch thing as society Thereis only the market.' - Margaret Thatcher

'Perceptions become reality' — Henry Kissinger (after Niccolo Machiavelli)

'When you have elminated the improbable, whatever remains, however um probable must be the truth ' - Sheriock Holmes via Arthur Conan Doyle

'Naturally, the common people don't want war, neither in Russia, nor in England, nor for that matter in Germany That1is understood But, after all, it 1s the leaders of the country who determine the pohcy and it 1s always a srmple matter to drag the people along, whether 1t 1s a democracy or a fascist dictatorship, or a parhament, or acommunist dictatorship Voice or no voice the people can always be brought tothe bidding of the leaders Thatis easy All you have to do is tell them they are being attacked and denounce the peacemakers for lack of patriotism and exposing the country to danger, 1t works the same mm any coun try' — Hermann Goerring

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'It was on the advice of Governor Rockefeller, who descnbed Mr Kissinger as 'the smartest guy available', that Mr Nixon chose him for his top advisor on foreign pohcy' - US News and World Report, 1971

'The history of the twentieth century can best be understood by coming to the reahsation that for the first me 1n the course of human events, the whole world has come under a single idea This dea, which goes by many names and under many guises, always ends up tn some form of collectivism, which crashes the lives and aspirations of individuals in its utopian quest for heaven on earth' - Donald McAlvany

'To parody the words of Winston Churchill, never have so many been manipulated so much by so few'— Aldous Huxley

'It 1s forbidden to kill, therefore all murderers are punished unless they kill in large numbers and to the sound of trumpets' - Voltaire

'Those who would give up essential hberty, to purchase a hittle temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety' — Benjamin Franklin

'The people never give up their liberties but under some delusion' - Edmund Burke

If you do not fight for nght when you can easily win without bloodshed, 1f you will not fight when your victory will be sure and not too costly, you may come to the moment when you will have to fight with all the odds agaist you and only a precarious chance of survival There may be even a worse fight You may haveto fight when there 1s no hope of victory because itis better to perish than live as slaves' ~ Winston Churchill

‘With stupidity the Gods themselves struggle m vain '— Friedrich Schiller

‘The atmosphere of hatred in which controversy is conducted blinds people To admit that an opponent might be both honest and intelligent is felt to be intolerable‘ - George Orwell

'The world 1s governed by very different personages from what 1s rmagined by those who are not behind the scenes ’- Benyamun Disraeli

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‘Man’s dearest possession 1s hfe It1s given to him but once, and he must live it so as to feel no torturing regrets for wasted years, never know the burning shame of a mean and petty past, so live that, dying, he might say all my life, all my strength were given to the finest cause in all the world ~ the fight for the Liberation of Mankind’ - Nicolai Ostrovsky

‘Doctor, there is no place for an ll old woman or anill old man anywhere 1n this world —1f they lack money’— Andrew MacAlian

‘Truth lives on in the midst of deception’ - Friedrich Schiller

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Part Three: How things got the way they are

Introduction

In the introduction to his brilliantly researched book The Greenmg The Environmentalists’ Drive for Global Power, Larry Abraham {who wrote the book with Frankhn Sanders) explained that he had for 30 years observed and chromcled numerous onslaughts which were designed to reduce the sovereignty of the individual and transfer more power to our governments And he warned (and his book was published in 1993 so the warnings were made three decades ago) that the greatest surrender of I:berty in all human history was underway and that power was being transferred to a small group of people - the Establishment

Abraham pointed out that every one of the projects designed to take away our rights and give them to our governments was promoted as ‘necessary or ‘vital’ and that some were touted as ‘life-saving’

He explained that a well orgamsed minority somehow managed to create 'the appearance of popular support' for projects designed to ‘preserve the environ ment’ or ‘stop pollution’, and that the people behind these programmes were members of a small group

He quotes Arthur Selwyn Miller, a former Professor of Law at George Washington University who wrote 'Those who formally rule take their signals and

commands not from the electorate as a body, but from a second group of men (plus a few women) This group wuil be called the Establishment It exists even though that existence ts stoutly demed., It is one of the secrets of the American social order' And he added 'A second secret ts the fact that the existence of the Establishment ~ the ruling class ~ 1s not supposed to be discussed' I would add that most of the people involved in promoting the myth of chmate change are probably intellectually undersized and possibly climcally insane

Even thirty years ago the climate change campaigners were 'steamrolling alt opposition, silencing critics by a feigned moral and tntellectual superiority, and, in the process, transferring global wealth and power on an unprecedented scale'

Well-intentioned but misguided people, manipulated and tricked into believing carefully constructed hes, now protest about the environment, and instead of marching for peace (as happened 1n the 1960s) they are campaigning, with increasing venom, against man himself They fly around the world in their tens of thousands (without ever seetng the irony in what they are doing) to hsten to

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speeches from skilled manipulators who have arnved at the conference venue in their private jets They have been hed to repeatedly, and brainwashed into beheving that man-made climate change is our greatest enemy Anyone who dares to refer to the true science, and who questions the hes, must be attacked, dernonised, cancelled and silenced

The misguided thousands are told to say that there must be no debate because there 1s no doubt but in reahty there must be no debate because 1f there were a debate then it would quickly become very clear that the Emperor 1s naked and everything the public has been told about man-made climate change is a he Anyone who questions their myth and their lies, and who dares to argue that man-made clumate change is not a real threat, will be demomsed and dismissed as discredited

On the other hand, those who promote the myth are applauded and well-rewarded for their obedience (and stupidity)

Abrahams pointed out that the dedication of well-meaning people was being rmanipulated (with phony data) and that while endless bithons of dollars of pub lic money was being spent, fortunes were being made

Today, exactly the same hes are being told 1n the Americas, in Europe, 1n Asia and in Australasia Politicians and media commentators everywhere are sticking to the script they have been given and, unquestioningly, repeating every he they've been told to repeat Any politician who dares to step out of }ine 1s ammediately crushed

"What's happening in the 'environmental' movement 1s not a zero-sum game,' argued Abrahams thirty years ago 'There are winners and losers ona vast scale'

In this section of this book I will show how ruthless bankers and financiers

have, for many decades, systematically taken over all the world's institutions, and how they have deliberately and cold bloodedly used the mythical threat of climate change to begin a process which will, 1f not stopped, almost certainly lead to a totalttanan world government and the deaths of billions The conspira tors behind the chmate change myth want to control all natural resources They wanit all the power and allthe money And to achieve their aims they will destroy every aspect of human life that stands in their way they will destroy farmly hfe, culture, history, patriotism and rehgion They will destroy pnde, respect and caring because they see these as annoying and potentially expensive weak- nesses The leaders of this massive he, mamly based in the United States, claim that 'a policy for safeguarding the environment ts also a policy for safeguarding

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it 1s endless) S@ricu ws wuss eemacee sears aun es ae usiwars Of great wealth while at the same creating famine, starvation and genocide

Ironically, the conspirators frequently claim that their actions have helped eradicate war For example, they claim that the United Nations and the EU were both founded to stop war This ts patent nonsense The world has more wars now than ever before America has been at war almost constantly for 100 years Never before, in human history, have as many people been killed or injured in wars as were killed or injured in the 20th century

The bankers and their allies created the United Nations, an institution built on a fraud, to help them create a world government, and together with leftover Nazis they created the European Union, because they felt that regional powers would also lead them in that dxrection And then they hurned things along by creating the climate change myth, regarding it and the absurdity of 'net zero as effective weapons tn their war for total control

Finally, to hedge thetr bets, they continued with the war-making, inciting wars, deposing or kiiing unhelpful leaders and using loans and debts to enabie them to steal natural resources

We are witnessing the greatest crime in history and if we are going to do any- thing about it we have to recognise that time 1s running out

Meanwhile, in order to fight this deadly virus of fear and les, we need to follow the trmeline and see who our enemies are, how they have fought this war Only by doing this can we look at their strengths and ther weaknesses In this part of the book I'm going to deal with the most significant influencers who have shaped our thinking on climate change, population control and other vital Issues

I should point out, of course, that the dates I have selected were taken not

at random but as necessarily selective and representative of the clearly wisibie trend designed to take us towards a world government, using the pseudoscientific myth of climate change as the weapon with which to create fear, mass hysteria and compliance

1762
Jean Jacques Rousseau, a Swiss wnter and philosopher, published The Social Contract m 1762 It was Rousseau who first pointed out that as people had grown less dependent on nature so they had become more dependent upon each

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world peace’ while, at the same time, starting and prosecuting an endless (and it 1s endless) senes of wars which have resulted in the transfer of great wealth while at the same creating famine, starvation and genocide

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other - with this, mevitably, leading to aloss of freedom Today, we see this most vividly in the way that power cuts leave us helpless and strikers cause chaos In 'The Social Contract', Rousseau pointed out that 'man is born free, and ev-erywhere he is in chains' but then added that 'Those who think themselves the masters of others areindeed preater slaves than they' Rousseau was an advocate of the 'back to nature' theory that 1s now so widespread, Cunously, however, he is now pretty well forgotten though he did have an influence as a very early environmentalist

1798
This was the year when an English economst and vicar called Thomas Maithus created the notion that the earth could only hold so many people He warned that population growth had gone faster than food production and that better hyving conditions meant that families were able to have more children He also suggested that the increase in population was a result ofa higher birth rate Al his theories were quickly proved to be quite daft His first theory, that population growth would exceed food supply and cause starvation, has never been the case There 1s a great deal of starvation in the world today (in 2023) but that 1s not because there isn't enough food but because there 1s too much foodin some parts of the planet and not enough food in other parts His theory that better living standards would mean more children has been proved wrong too If anything, people usually tend to have smaller families as they grow wealtmer And his no tion that the population was increasing because of a higher birth rate was also proved wrong The population was increasing because more people were surviv-ing infancy and, therefore, living longer

Malthus's work led ta the eugenics movement which suggested that undesir-ables and mentally 11] folk should be stertlised to stop them breeding

During the Third Reich, eugenics became very popular with the Nazis and the 1dea was spread around the world guite successfully by a number of people For example, Margaret Sanger, a radical feminist and the founder of Planned Parenthood took the idea to America where she called for coercive sterilisation, mandatory segregation and rehabilitative concentration camps for all those she regarded as dysgemic In the 1970s, George Bush (later to become President George Bush) said that 'it 1s quite clear that one of the major challenges of the 1970s willbe tocurb the world's ferthty'

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Today, those who promote the idea that the world ts overpopulated (and that something must be done about it) are often nghtly labelled as racist — a label which it 1s as difficult to remove as it is to deny Its, I suspect, their insistence that the answer to the overpopulation problem hes with poor countries in Africa and Asia, rather than with billionaires with large farmles, that makes 1t easy for sensible observers to hnk the overpopulation argument with racism

There are many large holes mm the argument that the world 1s overpopulated and that there isn't enough food to go round So, for example it is well established that farmers use less than half of the Earth’s arable land and yet, despite that, global food production has consistently increased much faster than population growth Moreover, some of the most populated countnes on earth (such as the Netherlands) have nevertheless been traditional exporters of food.

Several food experts have suggested that the earth could easily support a population of 30-40 billion Colin Clark of Oxford concluded that the earth could supply an American style diet for over 35 billion and that if people ate a Japanese diet, the earth could feed over 100 billion Roger Revelle, the former director of

the Harvard Center for Population studies, estamated that the earth could provide 2,500 calories a day for 40 bilhon people — even if farmers were using less than a quarter of the available land

Finally, there 1s now a widely held belief that the problem 1s not that the earth ts too crowded but that there are too few young people around Many countaes (ancluding China and Japan) have tnied to encourage couples to have more children

1891
It was in 1891 that Cecil Rhodes, the man who first realised the extent of the mineral wealth in southern Africa {and who gave his name to a country),

founded an organisation called The Round Table Rhodes, who believed in the idea of a world government, also set upa fund for scholarships at Oxford University and many of the leading Americans for a century have been beneficiaries of that fund Bill Clinton was just one famous Rhodes Scholar The Round Table has steadily grown in influence over the years

1913
US income tax was enacted in 1913 but within a few years, oi! and mineral companies managed to free themselves from the onerous burden of paying taxes

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They did this largely because they qualified for something called a US depletion allowance — which 1s a tax deductible credit reflecting the value of the oil which has been taken out of the ground (Naturally none of this money goes to the countries from which the oil 1s actually being taken) In addition, oil cormpanies, like drug companies, manage to avoid paying tax by the use of foreign sub sidianes based in low or no tax countnes So, American oil companies took on from Saudi Arabia and then sold 1t to Panamamian or Liberian affiliates These affikates then sold the oil to distributors in the US or Europe, making sure that the price was high enough to ensure that the distributors didn’t have to pay much if any tax Liberia and Panama are tax free zones and both use the US dollay as then currencies so they are extremely convenient

1921
At the end of the Great War {later to be renamed World War I), American and

British delegates at Versailles (where the Middle East was divided up and shared out among America, Britain and the major oil companies) formed something called the Institute of International Affairs and in 1921, the Amencan branch of the Institute was created and named the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) The Council's leadership and main influencers were bankers and lawyers acting for bankers For over a century now the CFR has been at the centre of American politics and most Secretanes of State, National Security Advisors, CIA Directors and UN Ambassadors have been members It has been usual, too, for chairmen of the Federal Reserve to be members of the CFR Other members have included leading bankers John Kenneth Galbraith and George F Kennan (both of whom we will meet later) were also members of the CFR It is the CFR not the two main political parties which controls the United States, and a fairly superficial scrutiny will show that The Republicans and the Democrats are actually members of the same party (The same thing 1s true of the UK where there 1s rarely, uf ever, any discernible policy difference between the three main political parties) In his book Power Shift, author Alvin Toffler describes the people who have the power imthe US as 'The Invisible Party' In the UK, by the way, the British version of the CFR is known as the Royal Institute for International Affairs

1930
The BIS was created in 1930 by the world's central banks, including the Federal Reserve Bank tn New York and the Bank of England in London The BIS was

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primanly the brainchild of Hjalmar Horace Greeley Schacht, the president of the German Reichsbank and the Naz: Mimster of Economics

Schacht set up the BIS because he knew that there was eventually going to be a war between Germany and other European countries The plan was that the BIS would enable the Nazis to maimtain channels of communication between Berlin and financial institutions around the world Schacht made sure that the BIS's charter emphastsed that the Bank would remain rmmune from censure or closure during war Moreover, Schacht was clever enough to disguise the BIS's main purpose by clatming that the BIS would help Germany provide the Alltes with financial reparations owed after Worid War I However, instead of money flowing from Germany to the Allies, it went in the other direction and was used to help Hitler build up a war chest for the coming conflict The Nazis were undoubtedly helped 1n this by the fact that the first presidents of the BIS, who were American, were easy to deal with (One of the first presidents of the BIS was an American called Leon Fraser who had been a tabloid journalist and who had little or no background 1n banking) The BIS, the central bank for central bankers,

quickly became the most important and powerful bank in the world
In March 1938, Hitier's armies moved into Austria, and one of the first things

the troops did was to steal the nation's gold and transport it to vaults controlled by the BIS More Nazi troops tned to do the same thing when they marched into Prague Nazi soldiers demanded that the directors of the Czech National Bank hand over Czechoslovakia's supply of gold — $48 million worth The directors rephed that they had already moved the gold to the BIS with instructions that it

be sent to the Bank of England Unfazed by this, the Nazis simply instructed the Czechs to tell the Bank of England to send the gold back to Switzerland The Governor of the Bank of England (a flamboyant and traitorous exhibitionist called Montagu Norman) made life easter for the Nazis by immediately authorising the BIS in Switzerland to take $48 million worth of gold from the Bank of Engiand's account and to put it straight into the German account so that 1t was immedi ately available for the Nazis to use By 1939, when the War began, the BIS had made many millions available to the Nazis

For decades, the Bank for International Settlements, then and now the most powerful bank in the world, has been so secretive that it is not even mentoned m most books about the Second World War Today, it is stall the central bank for the world's central banks butitis no exaggeration to say that without the BIS and

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IG Farben there would have been no Second World War And there would be no European Union

In 1940 an American, Thomas McKittrick, was appointed president of BIS as a replacement for Leon Fraser McKittrick was a lawyer and a friend of the Nazi party and he turned BIS into an armofthe Reichsbank Fluent in German, McKit

trick had previously worked for Lee, Higginson and Company and had made large loans to the Nazis There 1s no doubt that McKattrick's sympathies were with Germany Indeed, in 1940, during the War he went to Berlin and had a meeting at the Retchsbank with the Gestapo And the BIS under McKittrick continued to act as a middleman for stolen gold

By the start of World War II, the BIS was already controlled by Hitler McKit trick was the president of the Bank but the other directors cluded Hitler's econonucs adviser, Dr Walther Funk, Emu Puhl, a director of the Reichsbank, Hermann Schmitz, the head of the Nazi conglomerate known as IG Farben (the company which built the concentration camps and supplied the poison gas for the pas chambers) and Baron Kurt von Schroder, a banker and Gestapo officer

Throughout the War, the BIS accepted and stored looted gold and carned out foreign exchange deals on behalf of Hitler Much of the gold accepted by the BIS carne from the teeth and belongings of concentration camp victims Hitler's economics adviser, Walther Funk, worked with Heinrich Himmler {a leading Nazi and head ofthe 8S) toensure that gold from concentration camp victims was put into a special Reichsbank account Gold from jewels, spectacle frames, watches, cigarette cases and teeth was melted down into 20 kilogram bars and sent to Switzerland where it could be 'laundered' through the Swiss National Bank before being made avanlable ta the Nazis, via the BIS, as 'clean' gold McKittrick, who constantly provided the Rerchsbank with intelligence material, helped the Nazis take control of occupied countnies and their banks

Astonishingly, the Bank of England continued to cooperate with the BIS throughout the War, although the Bntish directors Sir Otto Niemeyer and Montagu Norman must have known that the BIS was effectively Hitler's mex-

haustible piggy bank Without the BIS's cooperation, the Nazis would have run out of money for arms and the Second World War would have probably never started or would have ended within a year or so at most In June 1940, $228 million worth of gold which the Belgian Government was trying to send to safety was intercepted by the BIS and redirected to the Reichsbank Moncy stolen from

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Holland also went via the BIS tothe Nazis Most of the money paid out by the BIS in dividends went to Hitler's Germany

In February 1942, two months after Pearl Harbour, the Retchsbank and the German and Itahan Governments decided that McKittrick should remain President of the BIS for the duration of the War In one Nazi document it was stated that 'McKittnck's opimons are safely known to us' The faith of the Nazis was well placed, for the BIS continued to provide gold for their use

Throughout the Second World War McKittrick travelled around Europe quite freely, on occasion bemg escorted by Himmler's special SS police force MckKittrick even went back to America for a meeting with the Federal Reserve Bank and then returned to Berlin where he reported to the Reichsbank

Not everyone ignored what was happening mm Switzerland In his book The Hidden Enemy pubhshed in 1943, Heinz Pol wrote 'The Bank for International Settlements in neutral Basel, Switzerland, has been, since 1941, almost entirely controlled by Axis representatives 'In 1943, Congressman Jerry Voorhis of California called for an investigation into the BIS, demanding to know why an American was the President of a bank which was being used by and for the Nazis Nothing happened Again, in early 1944, Congressman John F Coffee asked sim1lar questions He pointed out that the majority of the board of the BIS was made up of Nazi officials but that American money was being deposited inthe bank At an International Monetary Conference held at Bretton Woods in 1944, a Norwef1an economust called Willzam Keilhau called for the BIS to be dissolved and for there to be an investigation of the bank's books and records However, Keynes, an mfluential economist, said that the BIS should be allowed to continue until a new world bank and an international monetary fund could be set up. Amazingly, the argument for retaining the BIS was that the bank would help restore and rebuuid Germany at the end of the War It was argued that if the BIS were dissolved, the Germans would fear that their relahonship with Amenca mught not survive the end of the War

Nevertheless it was dectded by the Americans that the BIS should be hquidated Astonishingly, however, McKittrick simply refused to accept the decision He wrote to America and to Britain arguing that when the War ended the Alhes would have to pay huge sums of money for the rebuilding of Germany and that these would be best paid through the BIS When questioned about the gold which the Nazis had stolen, McKiattnck replied, apparently with a straight face, that it was being held1n the vaults of the Reichsbank so that it could be returned

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to its owners after the end of the War In May of 1944, McKittrick and his staff dealt with the $378 million m gold which the Naz: Government sent to Switzer land for use after the War By then the Nazts realised that they were losing the War and the gold (some of which had been stolen from the national banks of Austria, Belpium, Czechoslovakia and Holland and some of which had been

melted down from gold collected from jewellery spectacle frames and teeth of murdered prisoners in the concentration camps) was intended to be used by the Nazis after the end of the War McKittrick must have known this but he and the BIS were happy to deal with the stolen gold In 1948, the BIS was ordered to hand the looted gold over to the Alhes The amount handed over came to just $4 mullion

No one at the BIS ever admitted what had happened to the hundreds of millions in stolen gold which had been deposited there by the Nazis No one ever found the $374 million which was missing from the money sent for the use of the Nazis after the end of the War

There was ample evidence to show that McKitrick had willingly cooperated with the Nazis but after the War he was given important posts in America in cluding being made vice-president of the Chase National Bank (This was perhaps not surprising since during the War the Chase Bank in Paris had helped finance the Nazis)

After the end of the War, Karl Blessing, a Nazi who had controlled an army of slave labourers in Germany’s concentration camps, returned to the BIS and be came president of the Bundesbank Nevertheless, it was felt that someone from the BIS needed to be puntshed and so in 1945, Emil Puhl, who had been vice president of the Reichsbank and a director of the BIS, was one of the few civihan Nazts to be found guilty of war crimes Puhl had been responstble for moving Naz) gold during the War — knowing that much of the gold had come from prisoners in Germany’s various concentration camps Puhil was sentenced toa modest five years in prison but he appears to have served very httle of this and in 1950 he was invited by his friend Thomas McKittrick to visit America as his guest Puhl, a Nazi economist, director of the BIS and the Reichsbank had been McKittrick’s go between with the Nazis

The Americans and the British wanted the Bank for International Settlements to be dissolved after the end of the War but instead, 1t went from strength to strength In 1954, the European Coal and Steel Community (the forerunner of the European Union) asked the United States for a loan of $100 million In-

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evitably, the loan was arranged with the help of the BIS — the bank which had worked closely with the Nazis during World War II

Legally untouchable and existing outside all jurisdictions, the BIS was created to act as the central bank for central bankers It is disturbing to realise that the

BIS ts still the most powerful financial institution in the world though many politicians, economusts and bankers have never even heard of it

The BIS has been at the centre of financial events since the end of World War II

1941
In many ways, 1941 was the most significant year of the Second World War It was m 1941 that the Alles began to put time and effort into post war pian-ning Roosevelt produced his Four Freedoms in January 1941, and the Anglo American Atlantic Charter was published in that year It was also im that year (after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbour ~ which actually came as no surprise to anyone) that Roosevelt produced his draft for the public Declaration of the United Nations Preparatory work was done by Alger Hiss who was acommunist and a Soviet spy as well being a member of the Council on Foreign Relations The document declared that the 26 states which had signed were fighting ‘to defend life, liberty, independence, and religious freedom and to preserve hurnan rights and justice in their own lands as in other lands’ The document was finally published on Ist January 1942 with the four great powers (the Umted States of America, the Umted Kingdom, the Soviet Union and China) Itsted first and 22 lesser states sted mn alphabetical order De Gaullist France was excluded from the list so as not to recognise it as a government

And thus was born the United Nations, and, ironically, the beginning of the end of hfe, kberty, independence and relipious freedom

The Umted States had refused to join the League of Nations after World War 1 because 1t wasn’t allowed to have veto power over decisions (the US has always refused to join any judicial, economic or diplomatic institution unless it has yeto power) and the US only agreed to join the UN on condition that it had the power of veto (And, of course, the US has veto power over the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund - which effectively means that Amenica controls these mmsttutions)

Because the US has veto power, the United Nations cannot pumsh Amenican war crimes (the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam or the use of depleted uranium

m Iraq and Afghanistan for example) and cannot punish Amentca for the theft of land, gold and resources or the breakang of promises (President Putin has de-scribed America as ‘non-agreement-capabie’)

Today, America creates sanctions agatnst other countries for no other reason than that the country being sanctioned has a policy which doesn’t match Amer-ican views So, for example, the US has troduced sanctions against Uganda be-cause it doesn't approve of Uganda's pohcy on lesbians and gays, etc

1943
It is generally thought that American helped Britain win the Second World War by providing ships, fuel, food and so on But things weren't quite that simple

The provision of arms and other help was a lend-lease scheme In 1943, President Truman said ‘If Bntam cannot pay us dollars for petroleum needed by her and cannot, by reason of a shipping shortage or other situation, procure the petroleurn she needs from the petroleum she controls in Asia, South America and the Dutch East Indies, consideration should be given as to whether she might not pay for the petroleum obtained from us by transfernng to us her ownership of an equivalent value of foreign petroleum reserves or of the English held secunties of the corporations having title to such reserves’

And thatis what happened
During the Second World War, the US opened up Britain and its Empire with

a ‘your money or your hfe’ offer —knowimg that Britain was desperately m need By 1945, the US claimed $20 Inllion from Brita — leaving Britain close to being bankrupt It seems that Amenican politicians {or at least some of them) have never been able to forget or forgive the fact that their country was once one of Britain's colonies

The US insisted that Britaan jorn the International Monetary Fund (on Amer-1ca's terms) and demanded access to Britain’s foreign markets The terms of the loan which had helped Britain dumnng the War stopped Bntain devaluing sterling until 1949, and that forced Britain’s balance of payments intodeficit Sterling became a satellite currency of the American dollar

What happened to Britain durimg and after the Second World War has happened to many other countnes around the world Loans are used to take control of assets and the bankers are the only winners

America was the big wmner m World War II, Germany did very well finan cially and Britain was the big loser

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1944
At the Bretton Woods Conference in 1944, two thoroughly evil financial organisations Were set up the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, The two orgamisations were set up by a couple of deeply unpleasant men Harry Dexter White (a communist and almost certainly a Russtan spy) and John Maynard

Keynes {a Bntish economist who beheved that governments could and should spend money they didn’t have)

The first president of the World Bank was a Nazi lover called John McCloy In her book The Shocking History of the EU, Zina Cohen explains that McCloy was the banker who helped war criminals (who had made huge amounts of money out of concentration camp siave labour) to avoid unpleasantness at the end of the War McCloy also helped set up the United Nations and was, without a doubt, one of the nastiest villains of the 20th century

Both these organisations are based in Washington
The president of the World Bank is elected and somehow always manages to

be American As 1 write, the President of the World Bank is Ajay Banga who was previously head of Mastercard.

So that things don't look bad, the president of the IMF 1s not usually an American but that doesn’t make any difference to anything Both organisations are effectively controlled by and for American banks and financiers and whatever it might say tn their constitutions, their rea! aims are to ensure that really, horrible rich people get even ncher (for doing absolutely nothing of value) while poor people around the world (and poor and middle class people m Amenica and Europe) struggle, work hard, get poorer and die as soon as they have stopped doing useful work That's the plan and it’s working out very micely The World Bank is officially two banks (the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the International Development Association) and three other or

gamsations But the conglomerate 1s known as the World Bank
Since the World Bank was created, the US policy has been to secure foreign

markets for farmers and for industry Grains and meat have long been an essential part of the US trade balance and both are used as weapons 1n the fight for global supremacy US officials have led the World Bank to lend countries money for building ports, road building and other infrastructure and to pro mote the growing of crops such as palm oil, bananas, spices and rubber which don’t compete with US farm products Small farms go out of business as huge conglomerates take over the land And, of course, the countries producing these

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products have to nmport (usually from America) the essential food supphes they need Countnes are pushed to hire US engineers and construction compamies in order to produce these exports and they then see their earnings siphoned off with foreign owned companies (beholden to American banks) ending up with all the mcome Local taxpayers are expected to pay back the cost of the construction work demanded by the US and facilitated by the World Bank

The World Bank's policy of supporting large scale businesses (such as Monsanto-Bayer which is infamous for its policy of taking out patents on seeds which have been used by families for generations and thereby putting small farmers out of business) at the expense of small scale farmers has been widely enticised It is, however, supported by the US Agency for International Develop ment, the British, Dutch and Damish governments and the Gates Foundation

1947
The globalsts love creating new organisations designed to help create a world government They obviously feel that having lots of organtsations with the same aim means that their ambition will be more speedily fulfilled

In 1947, the World Federalist Assomation was farmed by a couple of members of the Council for Foreign Relations - Norman Cousins and James P Warburg (a member of the family which had helped set up America’s Federal Reserve System) The aim of the World Federalist Association is to turn the United Nations into a world government through a world court, a world mcome tax and an

mternational peace force (The Umted Nations describes tts army as a Peace keeping Force Not everyone would agree with this name UN troops helped a communist called Patrice Lumumba take over the Congo and slaughter innocent men, Wornen and children in hospitals in the early 1960s }

1949
NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation) was created in 1949 as a way to halt the spread of Soviet power in Europe Today, NATO is pretty well controlled by the United States, with the other members doing what they are told, America is the big rock star and the other countries in NATO are session musicians providing backing music NATO consists of dozens of commuttees and a huge military bureaucracy In 2022, NATO backed Ukrame in its fight with Russia and created (for pohtical reasons) a designer war Ukraine was not (and 1s not)

a member of NATO and there was no logical reason for NATO to be involved in

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the war In the spring and summer of 2023, 1t was announced that NATO would send depleted uranium shells and cluster bombs to Ukrame to be used 1n the war These actions turned all the leading politicians of the countries involved in NATO into war criminals

1954
It ts impossible to consider the plan for a world government without mentioning the Bilderbergers

I have been writing about the Bilderbergers for decades, and hike most other writers I've never been able to find out much about them Although taxpayers around the world always pay for their security, the Bilderbergers and the Biiderberger delegates all keep their meetings very secret And they naturaliy label as paranoid, and as conspiracy theonsts, anyone who suggests that there might be something ever so slightly suspicious about a bunch of politicians, bankers, officials, intelligence agents, war criminals (I can name at least one war criminal who has attended), media tycoons and industrialists holding regular secret meetings to discuss the future of the world Journalists who dare to try to find out what ts gomg on, what the meetings are about and the names of the participants quickly find the meaning of the ward 'secrecy' The CIA and MI5 could take lessons in secrecy from the Brlderbergers

You might think that having media tycoons at the Bilderberger meetings would mean that titbits of news might leak out occasionally But you'd be very naive to think that Consider this quote from Bilderberger David Rockefeller 'We are grateful to The Washington Post, the New York Times, Trme magazine and other great publications whose directors have attended our meetings and respected their promuse of discretion for almost forty years It would have been impossible for us to develop our plan for the world 1f we had been subject to the bnght lights of publicity dunng those years But the world 1s now more sophisticated and prepared to march towards a world government The super-national sovereignty of an intellectual ehte and worid bankers is surely preferable to the national auto-determination practised in past centuries'

Named after the hotel where the conspirators first met in May 1954 (the Hotel de Bilderberg in Holland) the group was created by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands, a powerful Dutch businessman, a friend of the Rothschilds anda former Nazt SS storm trooper who descrtbed ms work for Hitler as a lot of fun and yet somehow managed to remain an eminent member of Dutch society after

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the end of World War Il Interestingly, Bernhard was a Naz: at the same time as Klaus Schwab's father Schwab, of course, 1s the founder of the World Economic Forum (The hnks between the Nazis and those who want a world government are never ending) No attempt has ever been made to hide the fact that the intention of the Bilderbergers is to create a World government or as it has also been described a ‘new world order’

(As an aside, the Oxford Dictionary of English describes a conspiracy as 2 secret plan for a group to do something unlawful Since the Bilderbergers are nothing if not secret, and since their plans do not have any legal authority but do impact on every citizen in the world, it is clear that the Bilderbergers are conspirators (This fact rather weakens the labelling of those who wnte about them as ‘conspiracy theorists’ The conspiracy 2s not a theory it 1s clearly a fact)

Much is discussed at Bilderberg meetings, many decisions about our future are reached and many plans are put into action There ts much discussion of the usual issues such as world government, climate change, China, Russia, Brexit and the weaponisation of soaal media The main aim 1s to create a one world government with one central currency and one bank and one army However, although the dectsions and the plans concern us all, the Bilderbergers insist on keeping all their deliberations quite secret Nevertheless itis sometimes possible to trace events back to their meetings For example, after ane meeting (which was attended by Henry Kissinger, the U.S President’s advisor on foreign affairs) President Nixon opened up trade with China and devalued the dollar Ponce Bernhard had previously boasted that one of the subjects of Bulderberger meet ings was to bring about ‘change in the world-role of the Umited States’ There may be some who find it surprising that the American media, usually intensely patriotic and defensive, did not seem to mind one whit that an anonymous group of power brokers was intent on changimg the world-role of the United States!

1959
The Council for Foragn Relations has controlled American foreign policy for many years In 1959 the CFR published this statement ‘The US must strive to buid a new international order which must respond to world aspirations for peace and for social and economic change’

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Itis generally beheved that the World Wide Web was created by an Enghshman, Tim Berners-Lee, but the internet was created some years before that

American milttary experts were worned that one Soviet missile could destroy America's entire telephone systern An alternative was clearly required and im 1962, a sctentist in America named JC R.Lickhder proposed that a network of computers be set up that could talk to one another even if the telephone system was destroyed In 1965, another scientist found a way to send information from one computer to another using 2 system called 'packet switching' In 1969, the first message was sent from one computer to another Each computer was the size of asmall house

During the 1970s, the network grew and by the end of the decade alarge num ber of computers were involved.

And then in 1991, Tim Bermers-Lee, who was working in Switzerland, intro duced the World Wide Web Instead of being used as a mauling system, the World Wide Web could be used to store information that anyone could retrieve So Berners-Lee created what we now think of as the 'internet'

And in 1992, Congress in the US, decided that the Web could be used for com- mercial purposes (For the record that was the year when | first had a presence on the internet.) America has effectively controlled the internet ever since then Without the imternet, it would have been impossible for the conspirators to de- velop effective social credit systerns or digital currencies

We are constantly encouraged to believe that the mternet has made the world a better place But hasit* It hastaken away our freedom and created new stresses and pressures for everyone Social media and social credit have taken us, with quiet certainty, towards the quiet death of the spirit And surely it was easier to find a workman, for example, when you could look up local tradesmen tn the telephone directory instead of having to plough through pages of misleading advertising and trying to decide which of the companies on the internet are gen umely offermng a local service

More importantly, the conspirators love the internet It gives them complete control It has removed all our privacy All the mayor internet companies (Micro- soft, Yahoo, Google, Facebook, YouTube, Skype, Apple, ete, etc) will give your data to whichever government asks forit Governments everywhere can see all your emails, chats, all your videos, all your pictures, all your contacts and all the websites you have visited This mtrusion began when Obama was President of the US (he gave government officials the mght to monitor compliance and

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obedience and initrated the basis of social credit schemes in the US) and it has gradually become more intense Governments claim that they have to look at what people are saying to help them deal with national emergencies such as the fake climate emergency which will always do very nicely, thank you, when any government department 1s looking for an excuse to do something intrusive Since May 2023, the Federal Reserve in the US has been able to track everything

you do with your money, and President Biden has been pushing for the IRS to be able to monitor everyone's bank accounts Today, governments all around the world have estabhshed blueprints for controlling all their citizens and they are going to centralise everything, control all payment systems and give themselves the power to control how you earn, save and spend your money All thanks tothe mternet (In Canada, Trudeau used the 1988 Emergencies Act to freeze 266 bank accounts belonging to Canadians who had donated money to help the truckers protesting about mandatory vaccinations Bank accounts of American citizens were frozen too.)

Without the internet there would be no social credit system The internet has,

indeed, been essential to the fraud thats the Great Reset Allowing and encouraging anonymous comments and reviews was always difficult to understand until you realtsed how essential these have been for breaking down society suppressing and demonising truth-tellers and destroying humamty Governments every where have used their intelligence services to dominate the internet Inthe US, the CIA has been domimant and 1n the UK the British army deployed its 77th Brigade to assist the security services MI5, Special Branch and GCHQ

None of the things that has happened in recent years could have happened without the internet and there ts no doubt that the mternet has become the most powerful weapon against the people and against freedom But things can pet worse, much worse If and when the authorities decide to msist that those using the internet have a digital licence to allow them access, the future will be bleak indeed for those denied sucha kcence They wall not be allowed to buy food or electricity In June 2023, I reported that shoppers who wanted to buy food at an Aldi ‘shop and go’ store had te download an app before they were allowed into the store Anyone without a smart phone and the Aldi app couldn’t even enter the store | wrote at the time that ‘If we allow Aldi to get away with this then our war with the conspirators 1s over We are well and truly inside the Great Reset Anyone who shops at Aldi is a collaborator — aiding and abetting the totahtanan conspirators who want to take over our lives’ But few people took any notice or

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recognised the problem or thought about the millions of mainly elderly citizens who don’t even own a smart phone Thousands love the convemence of their smart phones and their ubiquitous apps

Politictans, commentators and computer companies claim that the internet, smart phones and other developments have all improved life But that depends on how you define ‘improved’

Are children better off playing games on computer consoles or spending hours every day keeping their Facebook profiles up to date and worrying about thetr socral media ratings? Today’s children feel delight when they receive an approving tick after re-posting a message written by someone else Is that the new version of pride and self-satisfaction? (I have little doubt that the obsession with ratings on the internet 1s part of the plan to accustom us to a world in which we receive ratings for everything we do The step from social media to social credit

1s a Very small one)

Social media has become so powerful that many now censor themselves for fear of being the victim of an organised attack by the mob (or, rather, the small

number of woke collaborators who control somal media) and losing their jobs, ther money, their homes, and thei reputations There 1s no free speech and no debate Soctal media has created a world in which people in cliques spend much of their time hurkng abuse at one another The world has become a sertes of factions - communists masquerading as liberals, transgendered individuals and their enthusiasts demanding ever expanding nghts, gays demanding more of something, anything, black hves matter campaigners thinking up reasons to protest, pro-vaccine enthusiasts abusing those who question the safety and efficacy of vaccination programmes and so on

And with internet robots, Al and government agencies adding to the smorgasbord of abuse, itis hardly surprising that m every country in the world fear has become the plat du jour Mobile phones have, for many children, replaced frendships, family and schoolwork Young people no longer live thew hves in a natural way They appear selfish, entitled and demanding and they overshare because they are constantly performing. They live in dread of the thumbs down buttons, the anonymous abuse, the disapproval from those within or without thew tbe Social media sites offer fame and fortune to the tiny few, and destruc tion and despair to the many Dishonesty and hysteria are deliberately encour aged Loaded weapons in thew hands would do less harm than smart phones Facebook alone has three billion users (I've never even been aliowed onto the site

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for I was told that 1 was too dangerous to their community to be allowed to joi) The lockdowns, the socal distancing and the mask weanng regulations broke their spirit In countries around the world chnicai depression is now endemic among teenagers and undergraduates Fears are created and exaggerated on a datly basis Self-harm and suicide are endermec too Research shows that chil dren who spend a quarter of their walong hours staring at their smart phones (an average sort of level of obsession) do not develop mentally Mask weanng slowed development still further The combination of smart phones, lockdowns, social distanctng and masks has caused anxiety, depression and aggression Boys tend to watch violent video games and become aggressive Girls tend to watch fashion videos on TikTok and thew ambitions revolve around that and similar channels It 1s not surprising that at school they absorb the garbage they are fed about climate change and blame the coming catastrophe on ther elders Alt this is being micromanaged by the collaborators on behalf of the conspirators It is behaviour therapy designed to create anger and illness Schools now dish out iPads 1n preference to text books and exercise books, though there 1s as biga need for health warmings on 1Pads as there 1s for warnings on cigarette packets Such online legislation as exists 1s designed not to protect the mnocent and vulnerable and naive but to crush free speech and truth telling which 1s considered dangerous

The authorship of the Report from lron Mountain has always been Indden be hind the pseudonym ‘John Doe’ but there 1s no doubt that the Iron Mountain report is entirely genuine (The establishment and the mainstream media have long argued that it is fake, and controlled opposition who have infiltrated the alternative or independent media have, for obvious reasons, also tried to dismiss the Iron Mountam report) However, John Kenneth Galbraith, the Harvard econ-omust and a long-term member of the estabhshment confirmed that the report was genuine and admitted that he was involved in its preparation In the Iron Mountain Report, Galbraith and his colleagues explained that war, or the threat of war, was a good thing from the point of view of governments because it helped to convince the people of their nght to nue They also admitted that war allowed for more expenditure {on arms) and helped create a more stable pohtical structure

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And when they looked for a substitute for war (or, rather, an ‘add-on’) Gal-braith and his colleagues agreed that ‘the substitute unless 1t provides a be-hevable life-and-death threat it will not serve the socially organising function of war’

The writers of the Special Study Group {who produced the Iron Mountain Report) also noted that ‘Economic surrogates for war must meet two pmnci-pal entena They must be ‘wasteful’, in the common sense of the word, and they must operate outside the normal supply-demand system A corollary that should be obvious ts that the magnitude of the waste must be sufficient ta meet the needs of a particular society An economy as advanced and complex as our own requires the planned average destruction of not less than 10% of gross na-tional product '

The Special Study Group examined a number of substitutes for a traditional war and considered a war on poverty and 'the threat of an out-of-our world invasion threat’ and their report includes these words ‘It may be, for instance, that gross pollution of the environment can eventually replace the posstbihty of mass destruction by nuclear weapons as the principal apparent threat to the sur-vival of the species Poisoning of the air, and of the principa! sources of food and water supply 1s already well advanced, and at first glance would seem promising im this respect, it constitutes a threat that can be dealt with only through social organisation and political power But from present indications it will be a gener-ation to a generation and a half before environmental pollution, however severe, will be sufficiently menacing, on a global scale, to offer a possible basis for a solution '

In a section entitled ‘Substitutes for the Functions of War’ Galbraith and his colleagues concluded ‘However unlikely some of the possible alternate enemies we have mentioned may seem, we must emphasize that one must be found, of

credible quality and magnitude, if a transition to peace is ever to come about without social disintegration '

And they add ‘It is more probable, mm our judgement, that such a threat will

have to be invented, rather than developed’ and, im summary, note that 'what is involved here, im a sense, 1s the quest for Wilham James’ ‘moral equivalent of war’

Finally, the report’s author gave readers some background information He wrote ‘The general idea for this kind of study dates back at least to 1961 It

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started with some of the new people who came 1n with the Kennedy Admunistration, mostly, I think with McNamara, Bundy, and Rusk’

The enthusiasm for war (or some substitute) as a means of controlling the population has been espoused by other groups

In their book, IMumrnat: Agenda 21, Dean and Jill Henderson report that in

1909, the trustees of the Andrew Carnegie Foundation for International Peace concluded ‘There are no known means more efficient than war, assuming the objective is altering the life of an entire people How do we involve the United States in a war?

1968
The Club of Rome was founded tn 1969 It1s descnbed as a global think tank, and although itis without doubt global and doubtless a tank there doesn’t seem to be much ‘think’ tnvolved The club follows the thinking of Malthus, and produced a report entitled The Limits to Growth which dealt with the rapidly growing world population and the allegedly finite resource supplies

Members of the Club of Rome, who believe m sustainabibty and have links to the WEF, have clamed that the planet earth can only provide resources for one billion people, and so over six billion must die Representatives of the Chub have given many lectures and been given many awards for their work on overpopulation and climate change - both of which members seem to beheve are real problems

The Club of Rome has a stster organisation the Club of Madrid which, you will surpnised to hear, supports sustainability and giobal governance Members in clude Billi Clinton, Gordon Brown, a vast nurmber of other former presidents and prime ministers and UN Secretary General Antomo Guterres

1968
Reducing the world’s population had been a popular theme among the globalists for some years but it was in 1968 that the argument about the world being crowded first becarne a popular topic in the media That was when Paul Ehriich published his sensational book The Population Bombin which he warned that the world was vastly overpopulated Ehrlch had obtained a doctorate after studying parasitic mites and the book was onginally published by the Sierra Club with Ballantine Books

Ehriich was always happy to offer journalists a prediction or two

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In 1967, writing 1n a British magazine called New Scientist, Ehrlich warned that the ‘battle to feed humanity 1s over, and predicted that between 1970 and 1985, the world would undergo vast famines He recommended putting luxury taxes on baby foods and diapers in order to discourage people from having babies, and advocated tying food aid 1n developing countnes to population control

Ehrlich got masses of publicity and helped found Zero Population Growth which advocated legalised abortion, government supported birth control, tax incentives for smaller families and a limit of two children per family (as was mtroduced in China) He argued that if population growth were maintained at its then rate, there would be 60 million billion people on earth within 900 years — with 100 people for every square foot of land and sea surface His prediction took absolutely no account of famines, disease and soon He saidthatthe world’s population would continue to grow as long as the birth rate exceeded the death rate and offered two solutions finding a way to lower the birth rate or raising the death rate (through war, famine or pestilence)

Today, the conspirators still clanm that it is necessary to reduce the size of the global population, and governments everywhere claim they are concerned not Just by the size of their ageing populations but also by the overall size of their populations And so there are global plans to cut the overall world population down frorn its current figure of around eight bilhon to a much lower number The figure of 500 million (just half a billion) 1s widely quoted as the number of people that the earth can comfortably hold This rmphes somehow getting rid of seven and a half billion people All of this is based on a baseless tower of lies Planet earth 1s perfectly capable of providing more than enough food for eight, ten or twelve billion people or even more and although there are clearly pockets of overcrowding, it is difficult to accept that the world is over-crowded The certainty 1s that much of the food 1s in the wrong place at the wrong time (because of politics, greed and faulty logistics) and many people are aiso encouraged to crowd into huge cities when there would be plenty of room for them if they were allowed or encouraged to live in or around smaller communities

It seerns to me that the conspirators have two fundamental depopulation policies 'End global poverty by killing all the poor people’ and 'End disease by killing ail the sick’

Their whole cruel philosophy 1s actually based on a myth
As I pointed out earlier, 1t was Thomas Malthus who, in 1798, first suggested

that the world’s population was growing too large and that the Earth’s resources

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wouldn't be able to cope Gloomy, Malthus predicted starvation, misery and

war

But the evidence shows that Malthus was wrong The world population was two billion a century ago and today it 1s eight billton but the proportion of people living in abject poverty has fallen from 90% to 10%

The 1rony ts that of anythmeg, the problem 1s that the population 1s growing too slowly Population growth has slowed rapidly in the last half a century and in western countries in particular the percentage of elderly and dependent citizens has risen rapidly as a proportion of the total population

There are, in short, too few working age citizens around The result is that governments are mtroducing policies ruthlessly designed to kul off the elderly and the sick (in other words the 'dependent') And the situation is getting worse Governments and councils are committed to paying pensions that they cannot

possibly ever pay It is still not widely apprectated but pensions are not paid out of the taxes paid by those workers but by the taxes paid by the generation currently working This has never before caused serious problems but today's younger generation seems to have taken exception to the way things work and have developed an antipathy towards the elderly which I find rather sad

I first warned about this huge demographic problem in my book Health Scandal which was published in 1988 and recently republished

1969
In 1969, Dr Jose M R.Delgado published a book called Physical Control of the Mind Toward a Psychocivilised Society The book 1s as termfying as the title suggests but Delgado has become increasingly significant in recent years with his work enjoying something of a renaissance

This 1s what 1 wrote about his work in my book Paper Doctors 1n 1976
'In the 1950s, Dr Delgado of the Yale University School of Medicine showed

that two cats, normally quite fnendly, could be made to fight fiercely if elec trodes implanted in the brain were given impulses Even when it continually lost its fights, the smaller of the two cats continued to be aggressive when stimulated In one dramatic experiment, Dr Delgado wired a bull with electrodes and then planted himself m the middle of a bullang with a cape and a small radio transmitter The bull charged but was stopped by Dr Delgado pressing a button on his transmitter The bull screeched to a halt inches away from its target Dr Delgado has reported that 'Animals with implanted electrodes in them brains

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have been made to perform a vanety of responses with predictable reliability as if they were electronic toys under human control'

Similar experiments have been performed with human beings The patients selected had all proved dangerous and had shown that they had uncontrollable

tempers By electronic stunulation every patient was controlled More detailed accounts of these expermments can be read in Physical Control of the Mind by JMR Delgado’

Delgado claimed that it was possible to control human behaviour in a number of ways

By implanting electrodes deep in the brain of mental patients and preventing or provoking certain lands of behaviour by stimulating brain centres with tny electric charges

Implanting tiny tubes im the brain and releasing into them drugs which change the activity of brain centres and hence behaviour

Having a direct line of communication from a bratn toa computer and back to the brazn without having information pass through the sense organs

Delgado reported that it was possible to control behaviour secretly because there are no visible wires or electrodes. Day and night supervision 1s possible without even touching the individual

And thus was born, over 50 years ago, the idea of taking complete control the behaviour of human beings

1970
In April of 1970, US President Richard Nixon announced the first Earth Day and that same year he establsshed the Environmental Protection Agency

The then UN Secretary General, U Thant, was one of the first of many to offer a scaremongering prediction when he wrote that ‘For the first time in the history of mankind, there 1s ansing a crisis of worldwide proportions involving developed and developing countries ahke —-thecnsis of human environment it is becoming apparent that if current trends continue, the future of life on earth could be endangered’

Since Thant issued this warning, pretty much the same warning has been issued by every political leader every media commentator and a Swedish school pri

And in that same month 1n 1970, an article by George F Kennan appeared in the journal Foreign Affairs (the quarteriy publication of the Council on Foreign

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Relations) Kennan argued that the ‘war’ on pollution would have to be nterna-tional since ‘the ecology of the planet 1s not arranged in national compartments’ and that ‘since this 1s an area in which no sovereign government can make these determinations, some international authority must ultimately do so'

We were, in 1970, clearly heading towards some form of world government,

and Kennan, the father of the Cold War between the US and the USSR, suggested a multilateral treaty or conventon with an instrument of enforcement managed by ‘true international servants with ‘dedication to the work at hand

Sadly, Nixon's scheme was not regarded as a huge success for two decades after Earth Day had been founded, one of the originators, Dennis Hayes, commented that 'Twenty years after Earth Day, those of us who set out to change the world are poised on the threshold of utter failure ' And Ken Weiner, who was Jummy Carter’s Deputy Director of the Council for Environmental Quahty said ‘It has been said war is too important to be left to the generals Some are wondering if environmental quality is too mportant to be left to the environmentalists '

Not that this mattered much.
The seeds had been planted And we were moving steadily towards the Great

Reset

1971
By 1971, America was spending so much on its mihtary adventures that Nixon abandoned the hnk between gold and the US dollar Prior to this date, countries had been able to convert $35 worth of dollars mto an ounce of gold De-lnking dollar from the gold opened the way for dollar hegemony America became the world’s banker Amenica could print doliars all day long and use them to buy anything 1t wanted

The neohberals have, since then, used the dollar ruthiessly, buying land, mnerals, public mfrastructure, pubhc companies, housing and goods with money they produced without restriction

When America didn't need to hold enough gold to cover their dollars, the printing presses could run 24 hours a day And eventually, of course, the Federal Reserve didn’t even bother ta have money printed It just manufactured another few billion doHars out of thin air

1971

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1971 was also the year when a Professor B FSkanner published a book called Beyond Freedom and Dignity (Dr Skanner’s work on the book was paid for with a $283,000 grant from the US Government's National Institute of Mental Health) Skinner, a soctal scientist, argued that if the world is to save any part of its resources for the future, it must reduce not only consumption but the number of consumers

The reviewer for Time magazine pointed out that Skanner’s message was that ‘we can no longer afford freedom, and so 1t must be replaced with control over man, his conduct and his culture This thesis, proposed notby a writer of science fiction but by a man of science raises the spectre of a 1984 Orweilian society that mught really come to pass’

Skmner attacked individual freedom and dignity and predicted that Western culture might be replaced with the more disciplined culture of the Soviet Union or China 'If you insist that individual nghts are the surmmum bonum' then the whole structure of society falls down'

The frighten:ng thing 1s that Skinner's arguments and predictions were (and are) taken 1mmensely senously And his work is now revered by the globahsts who want to reduce the world population by billions and to take total control of every aspect of our lives

1971
The World Economic Forum (pompously and arrogantly announced as 'Commut ted to Improving the State of the World') was set up in 1971 by a man called Klaus Schwab, though the organisation wasn't called that then When Schwab began what was to become the WEF he had an endowment of just 25,000 Swiss francs in a bank account

The first Davos meeting of what was then called the European Management Symposium, lasted two weeks and involved 450 participants, including chief ex ecutives and senior managers from top compamies and 50 faculty members from business schools

Things then moved quickly
The chairman of the second Davos meeting was supposed to be Herman] Abs

who had to cancel at the last minute but this link gives us a clear msight into the background of the WEF

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As Zima Cohen explaims m her book The Shocking History of the EU, Abs was a bank director who helped Hitler enormously by forcibly purchasing Jewish banks atlow pnces The money was then used to build the Nazi war machine

During the Second World War, Abs was a member of a secret group formed in 1943 and known as the Committee for Foreign Econorme Affarrs - a group of bankers and businessmen who met to discuss Germany's future after the end of the War

After the War, a friend of his, Charles Gunston of the Bank of England, asked Abs to help rebuild German banking - though Abs had been arrested as a war criminal and sentenced to death in his absence Gunston worked for the Bank of England as the manager of the German desk and was a semor official in the Bntish occupational authority after the War Gunston cared nothing about the atrocities perpetrated by the Nazis All he wanted to do was to help rebuild the German banks To this end he recruited Abs who was high on a list of Nazi officials wanted for war crimes Gunston protected Abs to help Germany rebuild its banking systern ready to continue Hitler's work Thanks to help from his friends at the Bank of England, Abs was not executed or even impnsoned, and by 1948, he was deputy head of the Reconstruction Loan Corporation and President of the Bank Deutsche Lander Unbehevably, it was then Abs who decided which Ger-

man companies should recetve the billions of doliars provided as Marshall Aid And for decades afterwards, Abs had a powerful role in Germany He was one of a number of former Nazis who helped create the orgamsation which became the European Union. (For more details of how the European Union was created please read The Shocking History of the EW' by Zina Cohen)

Until the mid-1990s, Abs was chairman of the Deutsche Bank and his Nazi background wasignored The Independent, a British newspaper, described Abs as the outstanding German banker of his ime and quietly ignored his work with IG Farben and Kontinentai-Ol, where he had knowimgly employed slave labour in the concentration camps Nor did they mention the money he had helped steal from Jewish people and banks. And this was the man Schwab asked to chair the second Davos meeting of his new organisation It has frequently been rumoured that Schwab's father was a Nazi who was an associate of Hitler but, of course, the fact checkers deny this

The honorary sponsor of the third Davos meeting 1n 1973 was Prince Bern hard of the Netherlands (a former Nazi and the founder of the Bilderberger meetings) and the Commission of the European Communities 'renewed its pa-

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tronage' An Italran industnalist dehvered a speech summansing The Limits of Growth, a book that had been commissioned by the Club of Rome and published in 1972 Participants drafted a code of ethics based on Klaus Schwab's stake-holder concept

It was clear early on that the WEF was very close to the European Commission ofthe EU with two meetings held at the European Commission in Brussels

Today, the WEF desertbes itself as a public terest not for profit orgamisation based in Switzerland [t has offices im New York (USA), San Francisco (USA), Tokyo (Japan), Mumbai (India) and Beyjing (China) In 2022 the WEF reported an meome of 383,000,000 Swiss francs in fees and other funding Out of this 130 mullion Swiss francs was spent on staff, with Schwab himself reportedly bemg paid more than $1,000,000 a year (plus, allegedly, rewards from associated com panies Around 252 mithon Swiss francs was spenton office and activity' (Itis interesting that many of those working with the consprrators in some way have become extraordinarily wealthy Tony Blatr, for example, was a modestly paid politician for most of his working hfe but is now a multitzmilhonaire The staff of environmental and green charities are often enormousiy well-paid and enjoy first class travel around the world) The WEF does not pay any federal taxes

An organisation which, just a dozen years ago was regarded as having no influence and was known merely as the organiser of an annual shindig where virtue signalling celebrities such as pop star Bono (famous to many for his tax avoidance schemes and hypocrisy) could rub shoulders with pohthaans and in dustnalists eager to be photographed with famous people, and which was not taken seriously by many people, 1s now one of the most powerful bodies 1n the world It has taken over from the far more secretive Bilderbergers as the face (and vorce) of the conspirators

Schwab himself was born in Germany in 1938 and acquired a variety of academic qualifications before founding the WEF 1n 1971 when he was just 33 years-old The WEF was originally called the European Management Forum but changed tts name to the rather grander and more ambitious World Economic Forum in 1987

Just prior to founding the European Management Forum, Schwab had been a member of the Managing Board of a medium sized Swiss manufacturing com pany with which his father appears to have been associated Today the WEF clams to have more than 600 employees but I would describe Schwab as (like

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Charles Ill and Tony Blair) as a fixer and a pimp for the conspirators None of them seems to me to be serious players

There ts no record on the WEF's website of how Schwab acquired the money to set up what 1s described (on its own website) as ‘the foremost global multi-stakeholder organisation’ nor 1s 1t clear how, within three years, his organisation had been able to invite political leaders from around the world to a conference in Davos

In 1971, the same year that he founded the forerunner of the WEF, Schwab wrote a book called Modern Enterprise Management in Mechanical Engineering (it seems unlikely that the royalties from this enabled him to found the WEF) There have been rumours that his mother was related to the Rothschild family and that his father was close to Adolf Hitler but both these suggestions have been dismissed by fact checkers (though we should remember that fact checkers claimed that the covid vaccine was effective and perfectly safe) In that early book, Schwab argued that the management of a modern enterprise must serve both the shareholders and the corporate stakeholders — with the stakeholders including employees, customers, government, creditors, iocal communities and financiers Schwab has worked with the United Nations for many decades and has advised various UN bodies on sustainable development issues Schwab has warned that there would be much anger in the world as the conspirators’ plans unfolded, and is best known for warning citizens everywhere ‘you will own nothing and be happy’

As an aside, it 1s curious, 1s 1t not, how the phrase ‘you will own nothing and be happy’, which is believed to have onginated with the Worid Economic Forum can be compared to the principles of the communist revolution as described im Karl Marx’s 'Communist Mantfesto’? Marx wrote that in order to establish a socialist dictatorship, and to obtain total control over the proletariat, the communists would have to eliminate ail rights to private property, destroy all re-lion, which Marx famously descnbed as ‘the opiate of the people’ and dissolve the family unit which was seen as a threat to the ability of the State to obtain total contral over people's lives (Today, under the Great Reset, traditional reb-gions will be replaced by a faith in nature as defined by the United Nations and promoted by the consortium of bankers who are managing the global economy Astonishingly, the leaders of traditional religions have accepted the change, and the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury seem happy to commit themselves

and their followers to the pseudoscience in preference to the traditional teach-

mings their rehgions have espoused. It doesn’t seem to matter to them that the science of chmate change 1s provably fake, they are wedded to, and happy to influence, the blasphemies promoted by the rabid environmentalists In 2023, a WEF advisor and establishment enthusiast called Yuval Noah Harari claimed that AI could create a new religion and a new bible, thereby making AI the new god This 1s, presumably, the proposed replacement for orthodox, tradihonal re-lhgnon We already know that Al will bnng an endless encyclopaedia of hes to the internet, now it seems, Al will also bring us a brand new fake rehgion)

Actually, as Gary Ailen and Larry Abraham point out in their excellent book None Dare Call It Conspiracy, which was pubhshedin 1971 the Cormmunist Man-ifesto was merely an update of the revolutionary plans proposed 70 years earher by Adam Weishaupt, the founder of the Order of IHumuinat: Today we can see the WEF, the Bilderbergers and the other conspirators following the recommen-dations made by Marx, and previously by the Order of IIluminati

Meetings of the WEF are held annually tn Davos and participants arrive from all over the world (many of them in private jets) to discuss the threat of climate change

Most dangerously, perhaps, the WEF has what it pompously calls a ‘Young Global Leaders Scheme’ which trains ruthless young men and women to be pup-pets ofthe cabal Many of the graduates get jobs in politics, the green movement, charity management and so on, and Schwab boasts that ‘graduates’ from what might by some be seen as a brainwashing programme can be found in high places everywhere The boast 1s justified and WEF followers can be found in many governments Sunak in the UK, Trudeauin Canada and Macron im France all have links to the WEF

The whole organisation reminds me very much of the Scientology cult though, as a replacement for the Bilderbergers and a promotional organisation for the European Umion and the United Nations, it 1s infinitely more dangerous and it has influence far greater than would seem justfied

1972
The 1970s were a bad time for freedom, and the first meeting of the Trilateral Commission was organised in New York at the estate of David Rockefeller All eight American representatives at the founding members were, unsurpnisingly, members of the Council on Foreign Relations, and the purpose of the Tnilat eral Commission was officially stated as bringing together representatives from

North Amenca, Western Europe and Japan to umprove the chances of a smooth and peaceful evolution of the globalsystem At least they didn’t hide the purpose

of the organisation

David Rockefeller first floated the idea of the Trilateral Commission at a meeting of the Bilderberg Group where it proved extremely popular

The formation of the Tnlateral Commission had been foreseen by Zbigniew Brzezinsk:, President Jummy Carter's National Secunty Chief who had argued that a world government would probably require two overlapping phases Part one would involve the United States, Western Europe and Japan forging a community with other advanced countries such as Israel, Mexico and Austraha Part two would extend the inks to communist nations

1972
The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) setup the World Herttage Treaty in 1972 The WHT had a committee, of course, and listed procedures for hsting cultural 'heritage' sttes around the world The WHT called for cooperation with 'international and national governmental and non-governmental orgamsations (NGOs') As a result of this new orgamisation's formation, nations around the world suddenly reported that the official 'heritage' sites and local citizens were encouraged to believe that having an area designated a 'heritage site' was an honour to be cherished Huge areas of land were designated 'heritage' sites with, for example, almost half of New Zealand's South Island bering hsted as a world heritage site Huge tracts of land around the world are now so designated

Once a piece of land 1s hsted asa world heritage site, ail local farmers, ranchers and loggers can be excluded, and all development must be stopped with UNESCO effectively acquiring ownership rights

World hentage sites were set up as a first step towards re-wilding huge areas of the world

1974
In an article entitled The Hard Road to World Order which appeared in Foreign Affairs (the house journal of the very powerful Council of Foreign Relations) Richard Gardner wrote that '1f instant world government, (UN) Charter review and a greatly strengthened International! Court are not acceptable to the people, what hope for progress is there?'

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Gardner suggested the following ways to get nd of national sovereignty A reform of the international monetary system, a rewriting of the ground nules of international trade, subjecting all countries to international surveillance, a steady increase in the resources of agencies such as the World Bank, giving them more power over economic polictes, continued strengthening of the global and re gional authorities charged with protecting the world's environment, population policres designed to achieve zero population growth, a control of food supphes, a new international control of the world's oceans, new rules and institutions to regulate emerging communications technologtes, a limit ta conventional weapons and increasing use of UN forces to patrol and supervise

1976
You might be surprised to hear that re-wilding 1s not a new concept The World Wilderness Congress, which began in 1976 claims that it is the ‘longest running, public environmental forum to build awareness and support for wilderness’ They claim to have mitrated the process that led to the World Bank’s Global Environmental Faculty

When the Fourth World Wilderness Congress met in 1987, delegates were probably dehghted ta find that the Denver Declaration for Worldwide Conservation had been prepared for them The founder of the WWC announced that the declaration was the ‘new Magna Carta’

Within a few years, the American Congress had authorised spending over $1 bilhon a year on purchasing private taxpayers’ property — and locking 1t away so that no one could waste 1t by building homes, farms, shops, schools, hospitals or factories on it Injusteleven American states there were already 86 mullion acres of wilderness and 133 million more acres were already designated for inclusion

In Austraha and Brazil, areas of land designated as suitable to be classified as

‘wilderness’ were measured in square miles Over 12 billion acres of land was designated as wilderness areas

It Was at this Congress that 1t was revealed that United Nations agencies, aid agencies and private NGOs had put together a massive surveillance database called the ‘World Wilderness Inventory’ The database had been put together by the Sterra Club (a private organisation which was founded in 1892 and 1s described as an ‘environmental orgamsation’)

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Among those attending World Wilderness meetings have been David Rockefeller of Chase Manhattan bank and Baron Edmund de Rothschild of the Roth schild banking family

And, you won't be surprised to hear that a World Conservation Bank was proposed to act as an intermediary between developing countries and private banks Debts and loans would be cooked up and huge areas of land would be transferred to the World Conservation Bank In other words, the World Conservation Bank would buy loans from developing countries and those countries would collateralise their loans with areas of land which could be designated as wilderness If the debtor failed to meet their obligations, the WCB and its stockholders would end up owning vast areas of land together with the oul, mimerals and other goodies underneath the land

The world’s biggest and most powerful bankers, the Estabhshment pushing for the New World Order, had been generous enough to find a'green way totake ownership of 30% of the world’s uncultivated land mass So, to give just one example, Madagascar’s Government swapped thousands of acres of its own land for over $2 milhon worth of bad debt

How wonderfully kand and unselfish of the bankers
And how very simple
You just get a country into debt (by lending therm money they can't possibly

pay back) and then you allow them to swap the debt for huge quantities of land — preferably wild land with lots of valuable goodies hidden underneath the surface

Governments, NGOs, banks, Green pohtical parties on the fnnge of power and tax exernpt foundations had come together to enable very rich and powerful people to take ownership of vast areas of the world's landmass

Naturally, President Gorbachev of the USSR thought it a splendid idea The Soviet Union favours a substantive discussion of ways to settle the debt crisis at multilateral forums,' he said 'including consultations under the auspices of the United Nations, among heads of governments of debtor and creditor countnes '

Are you now beginning to see how everything fits together?
Oh, and you may or may not have guessed that the people proposing that vast

areas of land be classified as 'wilderness' (and not used for building or farming) just happen to be the same people who clam that the earth 1s vastly overpopulated

And there's something else

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Do you remember the film Goldjfinger 1n which the baddie (Mr Goldfinger) wanted to destroy the value of Amenca's gold so that the value of HIS gold would soar in Value? Well, you may see the similarity here with what the banks were planning Ifthey control wilderness areas which are rich tn. oil and minerals they don't have to do anything at a!l with the land to increase the value of their own holdings Its the Goldfinger principle By taking oil and minerals out of circutation the value of their own holdings wull rocket

1989
The New York Times (for many years a propaganda sheet for the globalists and conspirators) reported in 1989 that Margaret Thatcher (then the Brinsh Pnme Ministerjhad warned that global warming could cause devastating floods and food shortages, though there was no evidence (scientific or otherwise) for this prediction Mrs Thatcher called upon the United Nations to complete, by 1992, a treaty that would require action towards stabilising the world's climate and she told the General Assembly of the UN that the treaty should be supplemented by specific, binding agreements regulating the production of gases that trap heat in the atmosphere Mrs Thatcher added that the restrictions would have to be 'obligatory and their applications carefully monitored'

Mrs Thatcher was effectively repeating the strategy that had been outlined by George Kennan in an article which had appeared in the journal Foreign Affairs in 1970

There was no evidence for the clam in 1970, there was no evidence for the claim in 1989 and there is no evidence for the claam now

1990
The prediction that :t would take a generation to a generation and a half for environmental pollution to be a useful weapon with which to scare the pubhc appears to have been pretty accurate for m 1990, at a conference entitled ‘Globe ’90', the Seattle Post Intelhgencer reported that the former Norwegian pnme Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland had told the audience that ‘Environmental destruction 1s a ‘ticking time bomb’ that poses a more absolute threat to human survival than nuclear annihuation during the Cold War’

There was no evidence whatsoever for this absurd clam.

1991

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The USSR fell apart mn 1991 after America had won the Cold War The year before that the World Bank and the IMF had laid out a plan to force Russia’s leaders to Impose austerity on their people and to give away the nation’s assets President Gorbachev naively trusted the US Government and accepted America’s offer to help the Soviets privatise thetr economy so that money could be available to in vest in the country

President Bush promused Gorbachev that NATO would not move eastwards if Russia agreed to let East and West Germany integrate However, when Clinton became President he reneged on the deal, broke America’s promise and simply reminded Gorbachev that he didn’t have a deal in writing. (Michael Hudson, in his book Destiny of Civiltsation points out that breaking promises and treaties has been American policy since the nation's birth, ‘as shown by its dozens of broken treaties with Native Amencan tnbes in the 19th century down to its with drawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action with Iran in today’s world’)

The result of Gorbachev's action was that a favoured few Russian kleptocrats registered public assets 1n their own names, sold shares to foreign banks and became immensely rich overnight

America became angry when President Putin ended the giveaways, and treated Mikhail Khodorkovsky as a hero for accumulating a fortune of $15 billion by buying privatisation vouchers and helping himself to oi] reserves in Siberia, (Most of the other oligarchs moved to the West, bought huge properties, yachts and football clubs)

Western investors who were in the know made bilhons by mvestimg in the former public assets Gncluding, inevitably, oil compames) Naturally, they paid no taxes

Nationa! Secunty Advisor Brzezinski boasted that Russia had passed into de facto Western receivership’

Gorbachev, the darling of the West, who had overseen this massive give away, didn’t last long

And when President Putin was democratically elected and tried to stop the foreign investors from helping themselves to his country’s weaith (and then sending it abroad as dividends, interest and capital) the Americans were furious

While the Warsaw bloc countries were weakened by what had happened, the United States (and their pet NATO) expanded Officials rernforced their view that the US alone had the right to use nuclear weapons first and that the US alone had the right to use mulltary force unilaterally President Clinton’s administration

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announced that 1t no longer felt bound by the UN Charter prohibiting the threat oruse of force And the US announced that it had the sole right to use force to ensure ‘uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources’

(Neither Clinton nor anyone else in the White House seemed interested in the fact that international law defines such behaviour as ‘appression’ and 'the supreme international come’ That, at least, was the view of the judges at Nuremberg.)

The result was a new Cold War with the US and its NATO allies ranged against China and Russia and any countries resisting the theft, by the US, of ther land and resources Everywhere NATO went it left behind huge numbers of bodies, destroyed towns andcountries with no future But every time NATO went some where, Amencan billionaire bankers got much richer

1991
The Trilateral Commission published a book entitled Beyond Interdependence The Meshing of the World’s Economy and the Earth’s Ecology by a Canadian called Jum MacNeill who was general secretary of the World Commission on Environment and Development (which was also known as the Brundtland Commission) The book warmed that the world was coming to an end and that there was a desperate need for a world government

MacNeill argued that it should be at the Rio Earth Summit 1n 1992 that the Establishment should take on the responsibility for the future of mankind

The foreword to the book was written by David Rockefeller who argued (with msider knowledge, of course) that ‘environmental issues are mghtly moving onto the central policy agenda and we all feel the need for a new synthesis’ (Sadly, there was no translation of what he meant in the book)

The introduction was written by Maurice Strong who had been executive secretary of the first eco-summut ‘The 1972 Stockholm Conference on Human Environment’ (If you are beginmng to feel dizzy at the existence of so many organisations with the same general, grandiose purpose you are not alone) Strong argued that decistons must be made that 'will hterally determine the fate of the earth’ and talked of an intermeshing of economic independence and ecological

independence and an intermeshing of the two (The one thing the ego warriors can do, other than hold up traffic and sprinkle coloured chalk dust in an un tating manner, 1s to create an impenetrable and mstantly forgettable phrase or sentence I feel bad about having to include so many of them 1n this book but if

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we are to follow the bits of bread 1n the forest we need to learn to read the runes See what I mean?)

What MacNeill was talking about (in the code of the time) was international central planning, a more equitable distribution of wealth, the end of national sovereipnty plobal control of resources, global central planning and a reduction inthe global population If you are beginning to think that this all sounds just a touch I1ke something Karl Marx nught have wntten then you are probably not alone In practice, there is little or no difference between modern environmentalismm, communism and, of course, fascism They are, in practical terms, identicaland interchangeable

MacNeill warned about overpopulation, global warming, deforestation, bio diversity, actd rain, nsing sea levels and overpopulation and also talked about sustatnable development and sustainable growth There was talk of the Earth Summit involving representatives of most governments, hundreds of major industries and thousands of non-governmental organisations - all of course, with axes which needed sharpening — and he talked of the need for environmental taxes, probably to be admumistered by the United Nations (Though the UN staff would probably remam untaxed)

MacNeill demanded an Earth Counei or World Environment and Development Forum to govern earth and look after the ordinary people who can no longer be trusted to have a say in how the world ts run

As usual, the only thing missing from this feast of rhetoric was the presence of any facts There were many warmings and much tub thumping but not a lot else

Sadly, Mr MacNeill is no longer with us though according to the Community Research Connections (which is, so it proudly says, a Sustainable Community Development) he was recipient of many honours, was Chairman of the World Bank’s Independent Inspection Panel and he was a member of far too many pan els and institutes and boards for me to hst here without your eyes glazing over Mr MacNeill is one of a new breed of professional advisors who travel the wortd, sitting on committees and panels and being well-paid to spread anxiety and incomprehensible solutions

Before and after this meeting, President Gorbachev of the USSR published proposals which bore an uncanny resemblance to the proposals which were pub hshed in Rio It's no surprise that as far as the West was concerned, Gorbachev was the most popular President of the USSR for many decades

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In The New York Times in December 1989, Gorbachev was reported to have spoken at the United Nations and said ‘International economy secunty 1s mconcewvable unless related not only to the world’s agreement but also the elumination of the threat to the world’s environment Let us also think about setting up within the frarnework of the United Nations acenter for emergency environ mental assistance’

1992
In Rio de Janetro in Brazil in 1992, the United Nations held a massive and now infamous shindig called UNCED which was designed to make environmentalism the world’s most important topic It was here that the UN’s Earth Charter was born and it was here that the UN revealed {to a no doubt excited audience) its plan for the future called Agenda 21 —- an 800-page detailed plan wntten to help the UN and its supporters take over the world and run everything in the name of ‘sustainable development’, with huge costs to be paid by unwitting and probably unwilling taxpayers everywhere

There was also a Global Warming Convention and a Biodiversity Convention The people at the UN (lke ail Greens) love treaties and conventions and declarations And they love committees and meetings ~ especially if the meetings are held somewhere pleasant and the expenses are paid by someone else (preferably taxpayers)

The participants at UNCED were largely collaborators working for the con spirators The conspirators themselves (the financiers and bankers who were behind the chmate change fraud) usually prefer to stay behind the scenes, just pulling strings as and when they feel 1t is appropriate or necessary

The plan was simple to form more international institutions of control, to get governments to sign treaties on global warming and to designate the national and international agencies ‘that will bear responsibility for the first phase of implementation, tentatively set for the last seven years of this century’ In other words the aim was to create instability and fear to unsettle the world’s citizens

It was generally agreed that the world wasn a pretty rotten state and that it was possibly either getting too hot or too cold and that whatever was happening was all the fault of people who needed to be pumished This meeting mm Ria was the culmination of the lron Mountain shindig held a generation and a half earher The Iron Mountain predictions were bang onthe button, though that wasn't much of a surprise

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With no hard evidence to support their position, the conspirators (and don't forget they founded the United Nations) chose climate change (and environmental problems in general) as a way to terrify populations everywhere, to excuse aperessive plans and to mobilise a growing army of collaborators who could be convinced to demonstrate and form action groups

Since the financiers and conspirators controlled the mamstream medza, it wasn't easy to manipulate the message being fed to viewers and readers everywhere around the world

Greedy megalomamacs had now forced governments everywhere to adopt long-range policies that were based more on science fiction than anything resembling real science Liberal intellectuals, teachers and lecturers absorbed what they were fed and became enthusiastic purveyors of misinformation to thew students

The myth of climate change became integrated into school and college curricula, And the myth was accompanied by the convemient belief that the ‘new’ problem could only be solved by a combination of kindly, caring governments and determined and commutted NGOs A new industry was born with bilhons of dollars to spend on propaganda Dozens of new foundations were founded, mostly led by key insiders and members of the establishment The Sierra Club, the World Wilderness Congress, the Centre for Earth Resource Analysis, the Heritage Trust, the Nature Conservancy, the World Wiidhfe Fund and so on control bilhons of dollars and are all involved in spreading the same message

There were plenty of hes and imaginative graphs and pie charts to excuse the plans forthe world But there was never any evidence

Any teacher who tells children that global warming 1s real 1s guilty of a crime of unimaginable proportions and unimaginable consequences This dangerous propaganda ts nothing more than an unpleasant branch of science fiction and1s destroying the hves of generations

It 1s, of course, impossible to prove that there isn’t any evidence to support the myth of chmate change (nee global warming) But nor is there any evidence to support the lies which are so freely shared And the most convincing proof that they are lying comes in the fact that climate change promoters will not debate thei claims

1993

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Every time there is famine, flood, wildfire or any sort of ‘natural’ problem, anywhere in the world, the chmate change cultists blame the weather More specifi cally and more significantly, they blame man-made climate change

But they are always lying
Let me illustrate how and why they are lying with this very short discussion

of what happened in Somalia in 1993, when the United Nations and the US Mihtary launched ‘Operation Restore Hope' to help a population officially devastated by drought, desertification and civil war

What was not widely reported was that Somalia's problems began in the

1980s Up until that tame, Somalia had been pretty much self-suffictent in food Then the IMF and the World Bank decided that Somaka needed help And, as Ronald Reagan once said, the most dangerous and frightening words 1n the world are ‘I’m from the government and I’m here to help’

The banks decided that Somahan agriculture needed reform and decided to help

Before anyone knew what was happening, Somalia had huge, unpayable debts to Washington based financial mstitutions - particularly the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Somaha had been helped into destruction.

Here's what really happened
First, Somalia was told that it needed a ‘structural adjustment programme’ Within a short time, Somalia became dependent upon imported grain andin

order to pay the bills for the imported grain the country had to borrow money The cheap imports with which Somaha was supplied by the kandly bankers

meant that local farmers couldn't make any money Fanning communities be-came impoverished

At the same tire the best agricultural land was appropnated by people with links to the Government This land was used for producing frunts, o1l seeds and

cotton which Amenca wanted.
The Somalran currency then collapsed and the pnce of 1mported matenats

rose
The World Bank decided that it could ‘help’ by insisting that farm ammals

should be vaccinated,
Naturally, the vaccines and the vets cost a good deal of money The World

Bank said that ‘vetennarian services are essential for hvestock development’ The Somahans had managed quite well without vaccines for a very long time (The vaceine ploy has been used widely for many years and is now universal in

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the US, the EU, the UK and elsewhere Farmers who do not have their animals vaccinated are not allowed to sell them Even pet owners are forced to have their annals regularly vaccrnated and micro-chipped.)

Water supplies were then taken over and privatised
The local farmers, nomadic herdsmen couldn't cope and were decimated The

World Bank thought this was a good thing because nomadic farmers in sub-Sa haran Afnca were viewed as a cause of environmental degradation

The Sornalians could then not afford the vets or the vaccines and the result was that Somalan cattle exports plummeted Their beef was not vaccinated and therefore not acceptable Instead of buying Somahan beef, their customers bought from supphers in Australian and the European Commumity

The Somalian Government was put under stnet controls by the IMF and tight budget targets were set by IMF ‘experts’

The banks then provided aid
Unfortunately, the help wasn’t provided as money or equipment but as food

The Government couldn’t give the food to the people but had to sell the foodin order to raise money to pay the foreign banks

The outside banks then took control of the country
The economic changes meant that health and education programmes col-

lapsed School enrolment collapsed, school buildings deteriorated, school materials could not be bought and then schools simply closed And thanks to the intervention from the banks, wages collapsed by about 90% The World Bank then took over the civil service Public expenditure was tightened

By 1989, Somaha had to find 194 6% of Its export earnings to cover its debts
The country was effectively owned by the US controlled banks

And when the people of Somalia started to starve to death because they weren't growing any food and couldn't afford to import any food, the US con trolled IMF and World Bank very kindly stepped in with more aid and more Ioans and more debt

Actually, of course, the money for those loans comes from Wall Street Banks
And it is the banks which hold the debts

Within less than a decade and a half the US controlled banks had effectively taken ownership of Somaha and all its resources

And naturally the owners of those banks, the conspirators who are pushing for a Great Reset and a World Government, blamed chmate change

Exactly the same thing has happened all over the world

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The American bankers use the power of the dollar and the world's agencies to explont and steal They overthrow any leaders who dare to stand up to them They used armed force (provided by the Amencan government) to install complrant dictators and then claim that the oligarchies they have created are evidence of westermised democracy They force foreign countries to keep their central bank savings in the form of loans to the US Treasury so that none of their ‘nvestments' costs them a penny

American neoltberals working with and for the banks have mastered the art of turning public enterprises and honest, simple utilities into interest paying financial vehicles And when they have created a large debt, they appropriate that country's land and resources and keep them for themselves The American taxpayers underwmite the threvery but it is the Amencan oligarchs who benefit And this has been going on since the 1980s Today, a tny number of Americans (bankers, financiers and property dealers) now possess more wealth than the whole of the middle class

The enthusiastic climate change nutters are merely aiding and abetting global genocide and the end of freedom and whatever remains of democracy

If you don't beheve that the US would do such things please do a little research of your own into precisely what happened in Somalha

Or, indeed, in any other country which has been allegedly devastated by ch-mate change

And take a look, for example, at the way the IMF forced Thailand and South Korea to allow more foreign ownership of their economies and how, as a result, American companies ended up owning key sectors in those countnes

1994
In 1994, the United Nations Framework Convention on Chmate Change came mto being with the aim of preventing 'dangerous' human interference with the chmate system (This 1s odd wordmg since there are currently numerous attempts being made to interfere with the climate So, for example, one enor-mously dangerous, even insane, plan is the one which involves spraying sub-stances into the air in order to stop the sun's rays hitting earth }

Today, most reputable scientists accept that manmade chmate change 1s a myth and that the whole chmate change movement 1s based on fraudulent evidence Back in 1994, there wasn't even any fake evidence available The UN created its Convention on Climate Change on little morethana whim 'The objec-

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tive was to stabilise greenhouse gas concentrations to enable economic devel-opment to proceed in a sustarnable manner'

Countries which were deemed to have contnbuted most to the alleged prob-lem were expected to reduce their emissions ta 1990 levels though there was never any screntific evidence that this was practical or even a good idea

The UNFCCC 1s one of three conventions brought into being at the Rio Earth Summut in 1992 (the other two were the UN Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification) and the UN reports (1n its usual pompous and meaningless wey) that tt was 'in this context that the Jomt Liai-son Group was set up to boost cooperation among the three Conventions, with the ultimate arm of developing synergies in their activities on issues of mutual concern'

The United Nations does not hke to trouble itself with boring science or with dull evidence, and especially doesn't like to trouble itself with scientific facts, 1t prefers to concentrate on creating ‘conventions’, having very expenstve conferences and forming Laison groups The UN is all about laws and rhetoric and get ting other people to dothmegs

2005
New Zealand, Chile, Brune: and Stngapore created the Trans-Pacific Partnership in2005 The partnership was a mutual trade agreement

In 2008, the United States decided to take over the TPP and the Obama admin istration sponsored lobbyists to transform the TPP mnto an agreement designed to block the public regulation of health, the environment, or other pubhe interest problerns that might interfere with corporate profits ~ namely American corporate profits Once again, Obama protected the big international compamies and the bankers and punished the people who had been foolish enough to vote for him

Obama's bailouts made the crooks ever ncher and impovenshed still further the poor and the middle classes The destruction of the middle classes and the poor is a deliberate neoliberal policy, in the same way that the destruction of Third World economies is a deliberate policy

The American version of the TPP gave power to a new court (an Investor State Dispute Settlement court) which could stop governments from suing companies and investors who had caused damage Worse sull, ISDS tibunals could order governments to pay fines to foretgn companies which felt that pubhe regula-

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toons had impaired therr profits The tnbunals could order a government to pay a company any amount it liked, without hmit And so the new court made it possible for bankers and compantes to do what they liked to a country without any penalty Andifa bank or company felt that a country’s labour or safety regulations might damage its profits, it could sue the Government for loss of profits

So, for example, when an Ecuadonan court ordered the oul firm Chevron to pay $9 5 billionin damages for causing pollution, an ISDS tnbunal in The Hague overruled the Ecuadonan Supreme Court To make matters worse the ISDS fined Ecuador $18 billion, plus interest, for cancelling a joint exploration venture with the oil giant Occidental

Small countnes are regularly rumed by these lawsuits which often involve small sums of money for the globalists but huge sums of money for the countries involved

The US Chief Justice, John Roberts has satd that ISDS has the power to review any nation's laws and annul the actions of that country’s legislature, executive and judiciary

The ISDS tribunals (which make the judgements) consist of three pnvate sec

tor lawyers who may also be the lawyers acting for the companies which have brought the legal action So the three lawyers bring a lawstut and then decide who wins And then they decide how much money the country should pay, in dollars, for daring to violate American corporate rights

It is, by any definition, nothing more than a racket and just as bad, if not worse, than anythmg concerved by the Cosa Nostra

Bankers and companies can even sue for what they claim are potential future

profits
All this sounds hke something out of a bizarre piece of fiction But itisn't It's

all true
Oh, and one other thing all this pro-Amencan legislation (much of it dealt

with in secret) means that consumers have absolutely no way of knowing whether the food which they eat has been genetically modified, grown with hormones, treated with chemicals or anything else

The conspirators behind all this can do what they damned well like And no one can stop them

And it is worth remembening that these laws were mtroduced by the Obama Administration which was ruthlessly pro corporate And nothing has changed In 2021, President-elect Joe Biden wrote in Foreign Affairs magazine that his

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mecomung 'foreign policy agenda will place the United States at the head of the table"

Thanks to the neoliberals all rnternational law is now drawn up by corporate lobbyists employed by the conspirators working towards the Great Reset

2007
The American housing bubble and subsequent financial collapse, didn't happen by accident, Banks deliberately pushed house prices to unsustainable levels and, in order to find a constant stream of 'greater fools' to keep buying overpriced properties, the banks offered 100% loans with no down payment Hundreds of thousands of dollars were loaned to what were calied NINJA buyers —they had no mcome, no job and no assets Mortgages were mven to unemployed black and Hispanic munonty borrowers who had no way of paying back the interest When the inevitable happened, President Obama {a long established 'insidet') refused to prosecute the banks who falsified income statements and provided false property appraisals Instead Obama bailed out the big banks with taxpayers' money - thereby making the bankers at the big stitutions a great deal mcher The bankers used the huge loans they were given not to help their customers but to pay themselves huge and utterly unjustifiable bonuses The losers were the millions of famihes and individuals who had trusted the banks Many of them went

bankrupt as their homes were taken from them Homeownership fell as private equity companies set up by financiers bought foreclosed properties at distressed prices and then rented them out at huge profits None of this could have hap pened without Obama, who was rewarding his Wall Street campaign contnbutors The home owners were not allowed to have their mortgages written down to the ‘distressed sale’ prices Only the banks benefited from the bailouts The black and Hispanics who lost everything had been the major supporters of Obama in the Presidential elections The 2007 8 housing collapse was a class war with ractal and ethnic overtones And Obama, the man millions had trusted, had shown himself to be on the side of the rich, white, mostly Jewish bankers In his autobrography A Promised Land (for which he received a huge advance payment) Obama sard he worried that ‘stretching the definition of criminal statues to prosecute banking executives’ would have ‘required a violence to the social order’ Michael Hudson, the author of Destiny of Crvilisation points out that ‘The refusal of President Obama and his Department of Justice to prosecute show the degree to which the distinction between rent-seeking and outright fraud and

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financial crrme has been thoroughly erased by Wall Street's regulatory capture not only of the Federal Reserve and Treasury but of the Executive Branch of government itself’

It is worth pointing out that there appears to be a revolving door between the big banks and the American Government with numerous individuals frequently moving to and fro without there apparently being any thought that this mmght be mn some way compromising Actually, of course, symular revolving doors connect the big American banks, particularly Goldman Sachs, and other Governments The British Government has for some years appeared to be an outpost of Goldman Sachs

The resulting depression which Obama created meant that the economy shrank and public sector budgets collapsed Government at local, state and federal levels had to cut back social spending and cut pension commitment In order to cut costs and raise money, government at all three levels sold public land and natural resources as well as basic infrastructure in order to pay back money owed to the banks Interest rates fell to zero or thereabout foranyone who had savings but banks and credit card compames charged thigh interest rates with the average credit card owner paying 29% interest Workers were squeezed by the rising cost of their debts And after the junk mortgage crash, the Federal Reserve created trillions of dollars (out of nothing) to bail out the banks that had bad loans The banks didn’t use the money to help their customers but they used the money to give themselves huge bonuses to celebrate their failure

The financtal troubles that had started im Amenca (thanks entirely to Pres dent Obama and the neoliberals) quickly spread around the world and in order to ‘help’ struggling countnes, the IMF introduced austerity programmes In countries every where, governments were given ‘loans’ and local taxpayers had to pay them back Wages, hymg standards and currency values all fell The American banks used the power of the dollar to ensure that they continued to make huge amounts of money

2011
In 2011, the US, Britain and France launched a NATO attack on Libya They captured, tortured and iniled Colonel Gaddafi and then destroyed Libya The country's gold reserves were stolen and the US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, gave Libya's arms to ISIS fighters so that they could attack Syma and Lrag

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The arm was to prevent those countnes from using their own oil to develop and grow stronger

NATO attacked Libya because Colonel Gaddafi wanted to seek independence from America's control of Libyan ot] He wanted to use his country's onl to develop a proper educational systern and a national social-welfare system. More dangerously for the US he wanted to create a gold backed African currency, throw out Amencan multary bases and obtain loans for construction from China instead of the World Bank Libya had the highest standard of living in Africa and Gaddafi was sharing the revenue from ol sales with the country's citizens

All that was more than enough to enrage the globalists who could see their power and influence waning and their control of the oul, and the money, disap pearing

And so Gaddafi was demonised and killed and his country 'captured', sacked and left im ruins Today, thanks ta America tn general and Hillary Clinton in particular, Libya 1s a wild country where slaves are sold in open air markets

2017
President Trump insisted in 2017, and then again in 2018, that the US hada right to take oil from Iraq and from Syria The reason, he said, was that the oil would be payment for the cost of America having attacked those countries In 2020, Tump repeated that America had the nght to take the natural resources of any country that it attacked, as compensation forthe cost of the attack -— with ab solutely no reparations

America also attacked Venezuela, attempting (and failing) to depose President Maduro, and then persuading its NATO allies to impose sanctions on the country to disrupt the country's economy When Venezuela wanted to use its gold to pay for food and medicine which the people needed, Bntain (which was holding the country's reserves at the Bank of England and which had consistently sided with America in imposing sanctions on Venezuela) simply seized the gold and heid it until the American government decided who to make President of the country In a quite extraordinary judgement, a British high court judge said thatit would be ulegal to give Venezuela's gold to the elected President Maduro because the British Government didn't recognise him and wanted to make his political nval the President

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Much the same thing has happened almost everywhere in the world where there are supphes of oil, gas or valuable minerals And itis these offensive actions, conducted by neohberais fighting against democracy and freedom, which explain why America has been continuously at war since the 1940s and has attacked, interfered with or invaded over 200 countries since the end of the

Second World War Neohberals see democratic laws as intruding on ther hberty, and neoliberals do not beheve in holding corporations hable for the damage that they cause The trigger, of course, has often been oil and gas

Today, o1l and gas still remaim vital for aimost all human activities and America likes to keep control of the supply And so, America put sanctions on European compamies which were helping to bwild Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline Germany offered to build port facilities to import US Liquefied natural gas (at higher prices) but America still wasn't satisfied The US was determined to stop the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and, therefore, to ensure that Europe had to buy American gas

The war between Russta and Ukraine provided the US with a convenient opportunity to blow up the pipeline so that American ou and gas compames would once again control the supply of gas to Europe The mainstream media claim that Russia blew up tts own pipeline (when if it had wanted to stop the flow of gas all it had todo was turn off the tap) but itis generally understood outside the mainstream media that the Americans blew up the pipeline in order to preserve then own massively profitable sale of gas to European countnes — even though this meant that European consumers had to pay vastly inflated pnees for the heating, their fuel and, ultimately, theirfood The mgh costs of fuet in Europein 2022 and onwards were a direct result of American, not Russian, actions

In the UK, the Government has punished its own electors by umilaterally 1mposing special taxes and conditons on oil and gas compames working the North Sea This was allegedly done to help Britain reach net zero as quickly as possible

The evidence shows conclusively that neohberals run the world, which 1s now controlled by a new breed of individuals who have managed to meld communism and fascism with self-interest

2018
It was in 2018 that a young Swedish girl called Greta Thunberg first began to attract publicity for her views on global warming It seemed to me then (and seems even more so now) that she had simply been selected as a promotional tool by

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the conspirators Itis difficult for truth-telers to attack a young girl (particularly one with a form of autism) who seems to believe in her message And itis obvi ously difficult for crities to argue with a girl, however rude she might be, when she appears to have some sort of mental illness For the conspirators, Greta also had the advantage of being quite small and unhkely to grow too tall too quickly The one certainty in my mind 1s that Greta's mse to international fame didn't happen by accident or without a great deal of planning Sadly, Greta Thunberg's

claims have caused much needless anxiety and despair among children around the world

A short book entitled Greta’s Homework by Zina Cohen analyses and destroys the nonsense of chmate change

2020
The 1dea of the 15 minute erty (or, as it is also called, the 20 minute city) first really came to global prominence in 2020 when the socialist mayor of Pans announced a plan to introduce the concept to the French capital

The idea of the 15 minute city 1s that all daily necessities such as accommoda tion, food, shops, work, education, health care and leisure can be found within an area where everyone can get everywhere (on foot or by bicycle} within 15 minutes

Within months, cities and towns all] over the world were announcing that they would become 15 minute cities and that motorised traffic would be stnictly controlled or even banned. Residents m 15 minute cities were told that they would only be allowed out of their area on a limited number of days a year Road blocks, either manned or equipped with barriers would ensure that citizens obeyed the laws, and a plethora of CCTV cameras would help maintain diseipline and ensure obedience

It was claimed that the 15 (or 20) minute cites would help cut down travel and would, therefore, help deal with the maginary threat of chmate change

According to a report from ‘ARUP C40 Cities and University of Leeds’ entitled The Future of Urban Consumption, the 'arnbitious’ target for the year 2030 is for individuals to eat no meat and no dairy produce and to have no household food waste And the ‘ambitious’ target for the year 2030 1s for each individual to purchase only three new clothing items per year 1 wonder how many people realise that these targets have been proposed and what the consequences will be for industry (both manufacturing and retail) What about growing children and

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shimmers? Do they have to wait a year for a new pair of trousers? [f you buy a shit, a dress and a sock do you have to wait until the following year to buy the other sock?

Oh, and the plan is that there will no private vehicles whatsoever and individuals will be allowed one short haul return flight (less than 1500 km) every three

years Laptops and similar electronic devices will be expected to last seven years Good luck with that

None of this proposal was decided democratically None of this was put to the yote I'd like to think that no one takes this stuff senously but I know they do This ts the future that is planned for us

2020-2023
Early in 2020, governments around the world claimed that humans everywhere were threatened by a new version of the plague I dealt with this fake threat in a book called Coming Apocalypse which was published in April 2020- just weeks after the fake scare had begun (I dealt with the fake pandernic and its consequences in a series of books which are hsted m the bibliography at the back of this book)

Dunng 2020, 2021 and 2022 and 2023, I repeatedly challenged the proponents of the covid-19 vaccine to debate the vacctne's qualities in public I had published evidence warning that the so-called vaccine cold cause heart attacks, blood clots, myocarditis and rmmune system problems 1n the autumn of 2020 — before the vaccine roll out began. | explained that I would prove that the vaccine did not do what it was said to do, that it was incredibly dangerous and would be responsible for more deaths than would be saved

Absurd figures were released suggesting that the covid-19 vaccine' had saved millions of lives but no one ever attempted to provide any evidence to support this wild conjecture [have been writing and broadcasting about vaccmes probably longer than anyone alive but no one would debate with me | am not surprised Whenever it is considered inconvenient, which 1s most of the time, the truth must be suppressed and the truth-tellers must be oppressed and silenced

Although they have never been shown to be safe nor effective, and what evidence 1s available shows that they do far more harm than good (my book Any one who tells you vaccines are safe and effective is bing here's the proof contams shocking statistical evidence about heavily promoted vaccines such as those for

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polio and smallpox) vaccination programmes are promoted heavily for a number of reasons they can be used to force compliance, they make huge amounts of money for the pharmaceutical tndustry, they can be used to cull populations, they can be used to tnduce infertility 1n future generations and they enable governments to 'prove' that they are caring people, deeply concerned for the welfare ofthe public

It 1s no exaggerahon to say that, throughout the world, vaccinahon programmes have been weapontsed' Vaccines are not treatments, they are methods of control and destruction

(As an aside, itis worth mentioning that vaccines, like other drugs, are often promoted on the basis of experrments performed on animals However, such expertments are entirely worthless and are used because, not 1m spite of, the fact that they are misleading There are two reasons why animal experiments should be abandoned First, such expertments are notoriously unreliable and give misleading results more than they provide useful results If you don't know which experiments are misleading then all experiments are worthless Second, the drugs industry itself will dismiss unfavourable results on the basis that ammais are so different to humans that tests done on animals are utterly unreliable My

book Betrayal of Trust contains the names and details of fifty pharmaceutical products which are known to cause serious problems when given to animals but which were approved for human use on the grounds that animal experiments are worthless And yet new products, such as vaccines, are given approval at least partly on the basis that anumal experiments were conducted)

When the BBC in the UK founded a special umt called Venfy to act as a sort of fact checking unit, I challenged the entire Verify Team to a hve television debate about covid-19 and the covid-19 'vaccine'

Naturally, I heard nothing

Exactly the same thing that had happened in 2007 8, happened again in 2020-2022 dunng the fake covid pandemic

The pattern has now become quite simple and straightforward. It is the same basic pohcy that the Americans used to destroy Russia (and help themselves to all the money) after the debacle of 1991

As local economies are forced to collapse and fall into recession, politicians and bankers move in. Aided and abetted by the LMF and the World Bank, they offer loans at usurious interest rates and take over planning rules, land owner ship and valuable resources

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The result of the 2020 2023 fake pandemic was that the American banks and financiers got much mcher and the rest of the world (especially hard-worlong, decent people) got much poorer

And, of course, the take-over of the world by the unscrupulous and greedy banking elite has spread into all areas of life

So, for example, small farms and small businesses everywhere are being shut down permanently as government aid and support goes to the huge, often crooked international corporations who have hundreds of lobbyists and can afford to pay bribes to keep politicians happy (When I say 'bribes' what I re-ally mean, of course, is that large companies and bankers pay out huge sums in campaign contributions And when politicians retire they variably recerve huge book advance payments that everyone knows will never be paid back out of royalties Oh, and pohticians are regularly paid vastly inflated fees for speaking engagements)

During the fake covid pandemic of 2020 (I have used government figures to prove that the official claims were fake and these are available on my websites and in my videos) pohticians m just about every country seemed to make the same 'mistakes' at almost exactly the same time - introducing lockdowns, mask wearing, social distancing and vaccination programmes which all did infinitely more harm than good Politicians now claim that they were merely acting on 'best advice' and that if they made mistakes then the mistakes were made in good faith But none of those things were mistakes Despite the appearances

nothing happened as a result of mcompetence, everything happened by design If politicians were merely incompetent it would be reasonable to assume that occastonally they would get things mght but they never do Seemingly inexplicable and indefenstble domestic and foreign policies in countries around the world were a result of careful planning, overseen by conspirators and put into action by enthusiastic, well-rewarded collaborators Itis absolutely no comcidence that every new government makes the same mistakes as 1ts predecessors And it 1s no accident that every new national and local government asks the people what they want and then ignores the answers

2023

In 2023, the World Health Organisation made it clear that they plan to force everyone on earth to accept a barrage of vaccinations —to be yabbed with a whole

sequence of jabs which don't do what they are supposed to do but which do hill people, make them infertile and create new illnesses

The World Health Organisatton’s refreshed plan for global dorminance via the needle was slipped out quietly while the mainstream media remains obsessed with the trivial activities of a bunch of Z lst celebrities and minor royals and, oc

castonally, with the latestin a sertes of designer wars created by American conspirators and ther fnends in NATO

There are people around who still don’t reahse this but the World Health Organisation 1s the terrorst wing of the United Nations, and for the last three years it has spread lies and fear with relentless enthusiasm The WHO's jobs to terrify the public and adapt the truth to suit the needs of the conspirators pushing for global power and a world government

The WHO 1s an essential weapon in the UNs armoury It has nothing whatso ever to do with health but ss a plain and stmple terrorist group and a vital part of the global conspiracy which 1s taking us remorselessly intothe New World Order and dragping us down into the Great Reset

The WHO 1s planning to bung a dangerous and unnecessary programme of compulsory vaccinations -all untested and dangerous Disingenuous as always, they and their jack-booted collaborators will say, of course, that the vaccinations aren’t compulsory and that 1f you don’t want to buy food or electricity, have a bank account, keep a job or leave your home, you won't need a vaccination certificate Of course if you do want to buy food and electncity have ajob, leave your home and generally stay alrve then you'll need all your jabs but as the loathsome Trudeau would probabiy say they won’t be compulsory

They think we're all stupid and the tragedy is that they're nearly right most people are stupid and most people will accept everything they're told by the WHO - an organisation now infamous forits Links with the vaccme hobbyist Bill Gates —a man with close hnks with the cuddly tno of the BBC, The Guardian and

Jeffrey Epstein

In March 2020, over three years ago, I warned that they would introduce compulsory vaccinations If you listen carefully you can still hear the sniggers and the abuse I received at the time Totalitanan regimes have always introduced compulsory vaccination programmes - though they've never before been planned globally and they've always failed 1 also warned about digital money and the rest of the plan

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Today, there 1s no need for any additional evidence proving that vaccines don’t do what they are supposed to do and aren't safe My book Anyone who tells you vaccines are safe and effective ts lymg is packed with information proving that vaccine programmes aren’t safe or effective And in the autumn of 2020, I recorded a series of free videos detailing exactly what problems the covid-19 jab would cause I warned about the heart problems, the clots and the myocarditis months before those problems appeared and before the jabs roll out programme Meanwhile, of course, mainstream media propaganda outfits were telling everyone that the vaccine was safe and effective

The official figures prove that my warnings - the best part of three years ago — were absolutely accurate The Government figures also show that there never was a pandemic and the remarketed over-promoted flu was just a pretty standard flu The so-called vaccine, however, is one of the most toxic pharmaceutical products in history - making thalidomide look good, The sensible folk who said NO to the toxic jab are today the healthiest people left on earth

There 1s now no doubt the covid jab is a killer, fake vaccine — useless but far

more dangerous than depleted uranium shells or cluster bombs Like bombs, rockets and bullets its only conceivable purpose 1s to lal people

The evidence showtng that the over-promoted, over-sold covid-19 jab is the most dangerous pharmaceutical product ever used 1s denied only by fools or shills for the conspirators and the drug industry I have repeatedly warned that the covid jab can and does cause or exacerbate a huge range of serous health problems — mcluding heart disease, clotting problems and cancer And as | warned two and a half years ago the immune system problems caused by the ‘vaccine’ are deadly

The evidence suggesting that the covid vacerne ts toxic is overwhelming and should be banned is constantly growing Any other product known to cause such severe problems would have been taken off the market a long hme ago

A review of 325 autopsies on patents who died after covid vaccination showed that 74% of the deaths were caused by the covid vaccine The nine emment authors of the relevant medical paper found that the organ systems most likely to be involved in covid jab deaths were cardiovascular system, haematological system and respiratory system The mean time between vaccination to death was 14 3 days A total of 240 deaths out of the 325 deaths were mdepen-

dently adjudicated as directly due to or significantly contributed to by covid 19 vaccinations '

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The nine authors concluded ‘The consistency seen among cases in this review with known covid 19 vaccine adverse effects, their mechanisms and related excess deaths, coupled with autopsy confirmation and physician-led death adjudication, suggests there is a high likelihood of causal hnk between covid-19 vaccines and death in most cases Further urgent investigation 1s required for the purpose of clanfying our findings'

Then there was the paper which appeared in the British Journal of General Practice recently winch showed that 'enlargement of axillary, supraclavicular or cervical lymph nodes following vaccination with covid-19 mRNA vaccines 1s more frequent than initially reported, with a rate reaching up to 16% following the second dose of the Moderna mRNA vaccine' The paper also reported that a few cases of lymphoma were reported in the literature

The authors warned that doctors 1n charge of patients with post vaccination lymphadenopathy should be reminded to consider the possibility of an underlying or corncidental mahgnant disorder

The truth, of course, is that there aren't enough doctors around to check fully

16% of all the patients who have a second dose of that vaccine
The covid jab ts causing one problem after another And the problems are ig-

nored or suppressed by the medical estabhshment
The covid-19 jab is responsible for a surge in type 1 diabetes among children

and teenagers A survey of 38,000 young people (reported in the Journal of the American Medical Association) showed that the mse 1s substantial Overtwo years ago, | warned that this would happen I warned that the covid 19 jab would push up blood sugar levels. The epidemic of type 1 diabetes is caused by the covid 19 vaccine And the drug companies will now get ever ncher selling treatments for diseases the drug companies caused

Everywhere you look there Is evidence proving that the covid jab was a hiler
In less than two and a half years nearly 2,000 healthy athletes have had heart attacks or sudden serious health problems — with over 1,300 of them dying

And yet the medical establishment, bought with drug company money, still refuses even to contemplate the idea that the deaths may be caused by their beloved vaccine They daren't admit that the medical profession is responsible for thousands of unnecessary deaths because they're terrified of the inevitable lawsuits not to mention the professional embarrassment

Doctors who gave the covid jab without properly assessing the dangers are going to be on the wrong end of the world's most expensive class action lawsuit

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But the vaccines have not been withdrawn No one in the drug companies or the medical establishment is issuing grovelling apologies

Instead, as has happened for over three years now, the doctors who are expas-ing the dangers of the covid-19 jab are being harassed, banned and censored

Any doctor who still prves the covid jab 1s a dangerous fool who should be struck off the medical register for life and arrested immediately for attempted murder

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Summary SFIS RE EDI CELE!

Look back and 1t 1s clear that America has now been at war with the rest of the world for around 100 years The designer or proxy war against Russia, taking place in Ukraime, followed, almost seamlessly, after the disastrous and damaging war in Afghamistan which was a disaster to start with, a disaster throughout and a disaster at the end Huge numbers of Afghans and Amencans died for ab-solutely no reason and billions of dollars were wasted As usual, no one has ever been sacked or held accountable

It seems that for the Americans, or rather their political leaders, peace is now just a memory, not even available as an interlude between wars which have be-come a never-ending opportunity to spend more money on bombs, rockets and depleted uranium shells

Since the end of World War II, Amenca has created seermmngly endless wars artificially based on race, ethnicity, gender, religion or a drive for ‘democracy’, but really about acquiring money, power and control of resources America has become a pirate nation (In the 1990s I wrote two books about Amencan adven-tures One was called Rogue Natron and the other was called Global! Buily) None of those wars was fought to defend American hves or property, all were fought to give the conspirators greater power and more money All of those wars ended up costing Americans many hives and a great deal of money, all involved the trans-fer of money from citizens everywhere to the bank accounts and trust funds of the conspirators

NATO and the CIA have been destabilising countnies all over the world for more than half a century ~ paying for terronst help whenever it has seerned useful and appropriate They have, for example, destabilised much of Europe, with the result that atlases and history books are out of date almost before they are printed. One minute one jeader in one country will be in favour and then,

suddenly favours will move to another leader in another country Groups of dissidents are encouraged, financed and armed if they promise to build a better financial relationship with America

It was always inevitable that we would head straight for World War III, ammediately after Russia was forced to mvade Ukraine, previously descnbed as one of the most corrupt countries on earth Ukrame, remember, has persecuted Chns hans with a relentlessness that would have aroused screams of outrage a few years ago and has an army whose soldiers delight in wearing Nazi insignia.

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America needs to attack and suppress both China and Russia The conspirators have chosen to target Russia first but there 1s no doubt the militant conspurators in the United States plan to start a war with China

We are being mampulated and controlled by a cabal of well-known politicians and billionaires and taken into a totalitarzan society, with fear being the main dnving force The significance of fear 1n our lives can never be underestimated

While writing thts short book I was sitting in a cafe reading a volume of work by Petrarch and found these lines from Virgil in a piece by him entitled The Ascent of Mount Ventoux

‘Blessed the man whois skilled to understand
The hidden cause of things, who beneath his feet
All fear casts, and death’s relentless doom,
And the howlmegs of greedy Acheron
If the real history of the 20th century and beyond 1s ever written (something

which I arm beginning to doubt) then Obama and the Clintons and their fellow neoliberals will be remembered as the world’s most evil terrorists

It 1s surprising, is 1t not, how many Presidents and Prime Ministers (such as Blair et al) began their terms of office with very little money in the bank, spent therr years in office earmng quite modest salaries (supported in the case of Biden with money paid into his account from Ukraine and China) and then, shortly after the conclusion of thetr term of office, become immensely nch

The money paid to these former Presidents and Prime Ministers is usually handed over as massive advances for autobiographtes that virtually no one will ever want to read or as extraordinarily high speaking fees for making speeches that virtually no one will ever want to listen to The two Clintons were, between them, paid millions of dollars for their memoirs When they were being 1nvestigated over corruption charges neither of them could remember anything

The fees pard out to the conspirators and the coliaborators are, of course, payments for services rendered while the individual was in office And the main service rendered has been the creation of fear and the steady progress towards the Great Reset, the New World Order and a world government

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Part Four: Here’s what you can do

The conspirators are taking us into the Great Reset through their control of the mainstream media and much of the mternet - and they have an army of collaborators, bots and secret service operatives working on thew behalf In the UK, a special brigade of the British Army ts employed in spreading misinformation and suppressing the truth And GCHQ, the UK’s spy agency, has been busy suppressing honest, science based comments on the internet if, for exam ple, the authors of those comments ask questions about the covid-19 ‘vaccine’ Even guahfied doctors with sohd evidence to share have been suppressed and censored I wonder how many of those soldiers and spies realise that they are working against their own country and their own countrymen and women -the very people who are paying their wages In America both the CIA and the FBI have mterfered with the freedom of truth-tellers to share vital information

But there are more of us than there are of them and if we are to win then we have to doit by spreading the truth

Please buy and give away copies of this book or lend your copy to others to read Please don’t worry that I'm doing this to getrich Since early 2020 my reputation and income have been utterly destroyed and we have put most of our tame into sharing the truth The pnice of this book has been kept as low as we are allowed to make it If we make any money from the sale of this book (which is unlikely) we will use it to buy more copies and spread them around

The problern, of course, is that most people don’t want to know the truth They have been thoroughly brainwashed and they would rather just watch the TV soaps, play with their recycling boxes and find new apps to download onto ther smart phones But we need to persuade more people to open their eyes and to educate themselves in the interests of self-preservation We need to have at least 5% of the population on our side 1f we are to survive, and everyone in that 5% needs to refuse to accept a digital currency or a digital passport and needs to refuse to carry a smart phone full of officially approved apps

So, here's what you can do
Buy copies of this book and give them to everyone you know | have kept the

royalty level as low as possible and I promise that, if I do earn anything from this book, every penny earned will be spent on buying and distributing copies to journaltsts, influencers, ete (I have to buy copies from Amazon just like you do.)

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Appendix 1: A short bibliography

lread hundreds of books, thousands of articles and watched a great many videos

m the research, preparation and writing of this book Below I have hsted a few of the books | found most useful

1984 by George Orwell
A Bigger Problem than Climate Change by Vernon Coleman
Acry from the Far Middle by PJ O'Rourke
Agenda 21 by Ron Taylor
Animal Farm by George Orwell
BBC Brainwashing Britain by David Sedgwick
Behind the Green Mask UN Agenda 21 by Rosa Koire
Black water The nse of the world's most powerful mercenary army by Jeremy Scahill
Blackwater the mse of the world's most powerful mercenary army by Jeremy Scahill
Blind Eye to Murder by Tom Bower
Bloodless Revolution by Vernon Coleman
Brave New World by Aldous Huxley
Chmategate, The Maryyuana Conspiracy, Project Blue Beam by the Dot Connector Library
Coming Apocalypse by Vernon Coleman
Covid-19 Exposing the Lies by Vernon Coleman
Covid 19 The Fraud Continues by Vernon Coleman
Covid 19 The Greatest Hoax in History by Vernon Coleman
Dangerous Ideas by Eric Berkowitz
Destiny of Crviltsation Finance Capitalism, Industrial Capitalisrn or Socialism by Michael Hudson
Dirty Wars The worlds a battlefield by Jeremy Scahill
Dirty Wars The worlds a battlefield by Jeremy Scahull
Dynastic America and those who own it by Henry H Klein
Endgame by Vernon Coleman
Essays on Free Knowledge The Ongins of Wikipedia and the New Politics of Knowledge by Larry Sanger
Everything 1s Going to Get Worse by Vernon Coleman

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Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World by Sir Edward Creasy
Fog Facts by Larry Beinhart
Greta's Homework by Zina Cohen
Hidden Dangers How governments, telecom and electric power utilities suppress the truth about the known hazards of electro-magnetic field (EMF) radiation by Captain Jerry G Flynn
Hidden Persuaders by Vance Packard
Illuminati Agenda 21 by Dean and Jill Henderson
Living in a Fascist Country by Vernon Coleman
Love among the Ruins by Evelyn Waugh
Nobody Knows Anything by Robert Monarty
None Dare Cali it Conspiracy by Gary Allen with Larry Abraham
Notes on Nationalism by George Orwell
OFPIS by Vernon Coleman

Orwell on Truth by George Orwell
Parhament of Whores by PJ.C'Rourke
Politics and the Enghsh Language by George Orwell
Powershift by Alvin Toffler
Presstitutes Embedded in the Pay of the CIA by Udo Ulfkotte
Say NO to the New World Order by Gary Allen
Scrence, Liberty and Peace by Aldous Huxley
Scrap the BBC by Richard D.North
Shaping the Future of the Fourth Industrial Revolution A Guide to Building a Better World by Klaus Schwab
Social Media Nightmare on Your Street by Vernon Coleman
Sold Out by James Richards
Stuffed! By Vernon Coleman
Technocracy The Hard Road to World Order by Patnck M Wood
The Art of War by Sun Tzu
The Collapse of Antiquity by Michael Hudson
The Creature from Jekyll Island A Second Look at the Federal Reserve by G Edward Gniffin
The Dark Side of Camelot -Seymour Hersh
The Death of Money by James Rickards
The Fourth and Richest Reich by Edwin Hartnch
The Globalisation of Poverty and the New World Order by Michel Chossudovsky

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The Greening by Larry Abraham
The Greening of America by Charles A.Reick
The Hidden Enemy The German Threazt to Post-War Peace by Heinz Pol
The Lessons of History by Will and Anel Durant
The Limits of State Action by Wilhelm von Humboldt
The Man Versus the State by Herbert Spencer
The New Germany and the Old Nazis byT H Tetens
The Octopus Europetn the grip of organised crime by Brian Freemantie
The Press by A J Liebling
The Revolt of the Masses by Jose Ortega y Gasset
The Rockefeller File by Gary Allen
The Shocking History of the EU by Zima Cohen
The Social Contract by Rousseau
The Social Credit System in China by Anonymous
The Tainted Source The Undemocratic Origins of the European Idea by John Laughland
The Tycoons How Andrew Carnegie, John D Rockefeller, Jay Gould and J P Morgan invented the Amencan supereconomy by Chartes R Morris
They want your money and your life by Vernon Coleman
Tower of Basel The Shadowy History of the Secret Bank that Runs the World by Adam Lebor
Trading with the Enemy by Charles Higham
Tragedy & Hope by Carroll Quigley
Unmasked Inside Antifa's Radical Plan to Destroy Democracy by Andy Ngo
US-Imposed Post 9/11Mushm Holocaust and Muslim Genocide by Gideon Maxwell Polya

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Appendix 2: Author biography

Sunday Times bestselling author Vernon Coleman qualified as a doctor in 1970 and has worked both in hospitals and as a principal in general practice Vernon Coleman is a multi-million selling author and since 1975, he has wntten over 100 books which have sold over three million copies in the UK, been 1n best-seller lists around the world and been translated into 26 languages Several of his books have been on the bestseller hsts and in the UK paperback editions of his books have been published by Pan, Penguin, Corgi, Arrow, Century, RKP, Mandarin and Star among many others His books have been adapted for television, radio and the cinema and senaitsed im newspapers around the world and his novel ‘Mrs Caldicot’s Cabbage War’ was turned into a successful, award winning movie He has appeared on Top Gear (the motoring programme), written for a DIY magazine and contributed to a cookery video He has presented numerous programmes on television and radio, mecluding several senes based on his best-selling book Bodypower winch was voted one of the 100 most popular books by British readers

Vernon Coleman has written columns for the Daily Star, Sun, Sunday Express, Planet on Sunday and The People (resigning from the latter when the editor refused to publish a column questioning the morality and legality of invading Iraq) and many other publications and has contnbuted over 5,000 articles, columnns and reviews to 100 leading British publications including Daily Telegraph, Sunday Telegraph, Guardian, Observer, Sunday Times, Daily Mail, Mai on Sunday, Daily Express, Woman, Woman's Own, Punch and Spectator His columns and articles have also appeared in hundreds of leading magazines and newspapers throughout the rest of the world. He edited the Bntish Chnical Journal and the European Medical Journal and for twenty years he wrote a column which was syndicated to over 40 leading regional newspapers in the UK and to papers ali around the world. Local health officials were often so irritated by the column that they paid doctors to wnte competing columns without charge Fortunately, with a few exceptions, this made httle difference to the success of the column

In the UK, Vernon Coleman was the TV AM doctor on breakfast TV and when hecommented that fatty food had killed more people than Hitler, he wasn’t fired until several weeks after a large food lobbyist had threatened to puil all its advertising He was the first networked television Agony Aunt, working on the BBC

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Many mulhons consulted his Telephone Doctor advice lines and for six years he wrote a monthly newsletter which had subscribers 1n 17 countnies.

In recent years Vernon has been banned from all mainstream media because his views are often at variance with those of the medical estabhshment Since March 2020, the ban has been extended to include most of the internet and he 1s currently banned using or even accessing YouTube because the videos he made

contained uncomfortable truths He made over 300 videos which have all been censored or banned He was refused admittance to Facebook, being told that he would be 'a threat to the Facebook community', expelled from LinkedIn (with no reason given) and banned from all social media For over 30 years he has had a website (www vernoncoleman.com) and right from the start the site has been visited regularly by representatives of the CIA, the FBI and by members of armed forces around the world

Vernon Coleman has a medical degree, and an honorary science doctorate He has worked for the Open University in the UK and was an honorary Professor of Holistic Medical Sciences at the Open International University based in Sr Lanka. He worked as a general practitioner for ten years (resigning from the NHS after being fined for refusing to divulge confidential information about his patients to State bureaucrats) and has organised numerous campaigns both for people and for animals He can ride a bicycle and swim, though not at the same time He likes animals, cricket (before they started painting slogans on the grass), cycling, cafes and collecting cigarette cards Vernon Coleman is a biblio phile and has a brary larger than most towns He used to enjoy cricket when it was played as a sport by gentlemen and loves log fires and making bonfires

Since 1999 he has been very happily married to the professional artist and author, Donna Antoinette Coleman to whom he 1s devoted and with whom he has co-written five books They lve in the delightful if isolated village of Bulbury in Devon where they have designed for themselves a unique world to sustain and nourish them in these dark and difficult times They rarely leave home

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Appendix 3: What the papers say:

'Vernon Coleman wnites as a general practitioner who has become disquieted by the all-pervasive influence of the pharmaceutical industry m modern medicine He descnbes, witha weaith of illustrations, the phenomena of mad-ern latrogenesis, but he 1s also concerned about the wider harm which can re-sult from doctors' and patients' preoccupation with medication instead of with the prevention of disease He demonstrates, all the more effectively because he writes tn a sober, matter-of-fact style, the :mmense influence exercised by the drug industry on doctors' prescnbing habits He wnites as a family doctor who 1s keenly aware of the soctal dimensions of medical practice He ends his book with practical suggestions as to how medical care - in the developing countries as well as in the West - can best be freed from this unhealthy pharmaceutical predommance '-G M.Carstairs, The Times Literary Supplement {1975}

‘What he says of the present is true and itis the great ment of the book that he says it from the view pornt of a practising general practitioner, who sees from the inside what is going on, and 1s appalled by the consequences to the profession, and to the public '-~ Brian Inglis, Punch (1975)

'Dr Coleman wntes with more sense than bias Required reading for any Minister of Health' - Daily Express

'| hope this book becomes a bestseller among doctors, nurses and the wider public '+Nursing Times

'Dr Coleman's well-coordinated book could not be more timely '— Yorkshire Post

'Few would disagree with Dr Coleman that more should be done about prevention' - The Lancet

'This short but very readable book has a message that is timely Vernon Coleman's pot is that much of the medical research into which money and expertise are poured is useless At the same time, remedial conditions of mind and body which cause the most distress are largely neglected This is true' - Daily Telegraph

Tf you beheve Dr Vernon Coleman, the main benefiaaries of the hundred million

pounds worth of research done 1n this country each year are certainly not the

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patients The research benefits mostly the medical place seekers, who use thetr academic investigations as rungs on the promotional ladder, or drug companies with an eye for the latest market opening The future may hold bionte superman but alla nation's physic cannot significantly change the basic mortality statistics except sometimes, to make therm worse '- The Guardian

'Dr Coleman's well-coordmated book could not be more tamely '— Yorkshire Post

'The Medicine Men ts well worth reading' - Times Educational Supplement

'Dr Vernon Coleman is nota mine of information ~heis a fountain It pours out of him, mixed with opinions which have an attractive common sense ring about them.' - Coventry Evemng Telegraph

'When the children have finished playing the games on your Sinclair or Commodore Vic 20 computer, you can turn it to more practical purposes, For what 1s probably Britain's first home doctor programme for computers is now available Dr Vernon Coleman, one of the country's leading medical authors, has prepared the text for a remarkable senes of six cassettes called The Home Doctor Series Dr Coleman, author of the new book 'Bodypower' has tumed his attention to com puters '- The Times 1983

'The Medicine Men' by Dr Vernon Coleman, was the subject of a 14 minute 'commercial' on the BBC's Nahonwide television programme recently Industry doctors and general practitioners come in for a severe drubbing two down and several more to go because the targets for Dr Coleman's pen are many, varied and, to say the least, surprising Take the physicians who carry out clinical tr-

als many of those, claims the author, have sold themselves to the industry and agreed to do research for rewards of one kind or another, whether that reward be

a trip abroad, a piece of equipment, a few dinners, a series of published papers or simply money' —- The Pharmaceutical Journal

'By the year 2020 there will be a holocaust, not caused by a plutonium plume but by greed, medical ambition and political opportunism This 1s the latest vision of Vernon Coleman, an articulateand prolific medicalauthor this disturbing book

detects diseases in the whole way we deliver health care '—Sunday Times (1988)

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' the issues explores he explores are central to the health of the nation' — Nursing Times

'It ts not necessary to accept his conclusion to be able to savour his decidedly trenchant comments on today's medicine a book to stimulate and to make one argue '— British Medical Journal

'As a writer of medical bestsellers, Dr Vernon Coleman's aim 1s to shock us out of ourcamplacency it'simpossible not to be impressed by some of his arguments ' - Western Daily Press

Controversial and devastating' —- Publishing News

'Dr Coleman produces mountains of evidence to justify his outrageous clarms'- Edinburgh Evening News

'Dr Coleman lays about him with an uncompromising verbal scalpel, dipped in vitriol, against all sorts of sacred medical cows '- Exeter Express and Echo

'Yernon Coleman writes bnilliant books '- The Good Book Guide

'No thinkimg person can ignore him This is why he has been for over 20 years one of the world's leading advocates on human and animal rights 1n relation to health Long may it continue' - The Ecologist

The calmest voice of reason comes from Dr Vernon Coleman '-— The Observer

Agodsend - Daily Telegraph

'Dr Vernon Colernan has justifiably acquired a reputation for being controversial, iconoclastic andinfluential '- General Practitioner

'Superstar' — Independent on Sunday

'Bniliant" - The People

‘Compulsive reading '- The Guardian

‘His message 1s umportant '- The Economist

‘He’s the Lone Ranger, Robin Hood and the Equalizer rolled into one’ —- Glasgow Evening Times

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‘The man isa national treasure ’—- What Doctors Don’t Tell You

‘His advice 1s optimistic and enthusiastic '- British Medical Journal

‘Revered guru of medicine‘ - Nursing Times

‘Gentle, kind and caring'- Western Daily Press

‘His trademark is that he doesn’t mince words Far funmer than the usual tone of soupy piety you get from his colleagues '- The Guardian

‘Dr Colernan ts one of our most enlightened, trenchant and sensitive dispensers of medical advice ’— The Observer

‘Vernon Coleman 1s a leading medical authority and known to milhons through his writing, broadcasting and bestselling books ’ - Woman's Own

‘His book Badypower 1s one of the most sensible treatises on personal survival that has ever been published ’— Yorkshire Evening Post

‘One of the country's top health experts ’- Woman's Journal

‘Dr Coleman is crusading for a more complete awareness of what 1s good and bad for our bodies In the course of that he has made many fnends and some powerful enemies.’ - Western Morning News

‘Buthant '—The People

'Dr Vernon Coleman ts one of our most enhghtened, trenchant and sensibie dispensers of medical advice’ - The Observer

The most influential medical wnter in Bntam There can be little doubt that

Vernon Coleman 1s the people’s doctor '— Devon Life

The medical expert you can't rgnore '- Sunday Independent

A lterary genius '~ HSL Newsletter

‘L would much rather spend an evening 1n his company than be trapped for five minutes in a radic commentary box with Mr Geoffrey Boycott’ — Peter Tinnis

wood, Punch

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‘Hard hitting rmmutably forthnght '- Hull Daily Mail

‘Refreshingly forthright '- Liverpool Daily Post

‘Outspoken and alert’ - Sunday Express

‘The man witha mission '- Mormng News

‘A good read very funny and packed with interesting and useful advice '-The Big Issue

'Dr Coleman gains in stature with successive books’ - Coventry Evening Telegraph

‘Dr Coleman made me think again '- BBC World Service

'‘Marvellously succinct, refreshingly sensible '- The Spectator

'The living terror of the British medical establishment A doctor of science as well as a medical graduate Dr Coleman is probably one of the most bnihant men alive today His extensive medical knowledge renders him fearless '- Insh Times

‘His future as King of the media docs 1s assured ‘- The Independent

‘Britain's leading medical author’ - The Star

‘Hts advice is practical and readable’ - Northern Echo

‘The layman's champion’ -Evening Herald

‘All commonsense and no nonsense’ - Health Services Management

‘One of Britain's leading experts ’ - Shmmer Magazine

‘The only three things | always read before the programme are Andrew Rawnsley in the Observer Peter Hitchens in the Maal and Dr Vernon Coleman 1n The People Or, if I’m really up against it, just Vernon Coleman ’- Eddie Mair, Presenter on BBC's Radio Four

‘Dr Coleman 1s more illuminating than the proverbial lady with the lamp'- Com pany Magazine

‘Britain's leading health care campaigner’ ~ The Sun

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‘What he says 1s true’- Punch

‘Perhaps the best known health wniter for the general public in the world today’ - The Therapist

The patient’s champion The doctor with the common touch’ — Birmingham Post

‘A persuasive wnter whose arguments, based on research and expemence, are sound ’- Nursing Standard

‘Coleman is controversial but respected and has been deseribed in the British press as ‘ the sharpest mind in medal journalism'and ‘the calmest voice of reason' —- Animals Today

‘Vernon Coleman rebel with acause’- Belfast Newsletter

presents the arguments against drug based medicine so well, and disturbs a harmful complacency so entertainingly'— Alternative News

‘He 1s certainly someone whose views are impossible to ignore, with his passionate advocacy of human and animal nghts’ - International Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine

‘The doctor who dares to speak his mind ’- Oxford Maul

‘Dr Coleman speaks openly and reassunngly’— Oxford Times

'He wnites lucidly and wittily’ - Good Housekeeping

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Appendix 4: Reference Articles referring to Vernon Coleman (Included to counter some of the lies on the internet)
Ref 1
Volunteer for Kirkby’ - The Guardian, 14 5 1965
Ref 2
‘Bumbiedom forced me to leave the NHS'- Pulse, 28 11 1981
Ref 3
T’'m Addicted To The Star’ - The Star, 10 3 1988
Ref 4
Medicine Becomes Computensed. Plug in Your Doctor -The Times 29 3 1983
Ref 5
‘Computer aided decision making in medicine’ - Bntish Medical Journal, 89 1984 and 27 10 1984
Ref 6
Conscientious Objectors’~ Finaneral Times magazine, 9 8 2003

Ref 7
‘Doctor with the Common Touch '- Birmingham Post, 9 10 1984
Ref 8
‘Sacred Cows Beware Vernon Coleman pubhshing again’ - The Scotsman, 6121984
Ref 9
‘Our Doctor Coleman Is Mustard'-— The Sun, 29 6 1988
Ref 10
‘Reading the mind between the lines’ - BMA News Review, November 1991
Ref 11
Doctors’ Firsts ~ BMA News Review 21 2 1996
Ref 12
‘The big league of self pubhshing ’- Daily Telegraph, 17 8 1996
Ref 13
''Doctoring the books' - Independent, 16 3 1999
Ref 14
‘Sick Practices'— Ode Magazine, July/August 2003
Ref 15
'You have been warned, Mr Blair’ -Spectator, 6 3 2004 and 20 3 2004
Ref 16

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‘Food for thought with a real live Maverick ’- Western Daly Press, 5 9 2006
Ref 17
'The doctor will see you now’ - Independent, 14 5 2008

There 1s a more comprehensive hst of reference articles on www vernoncole-man com

Final Note from the Author:
If you found this book informative I would be very grateful if you would put a suitable review online It helps more than you can imagine If you dishked the book, or disapproved of it in any way, please forget you read 1t
Vernon Coleman

~ovleleu book 100%,

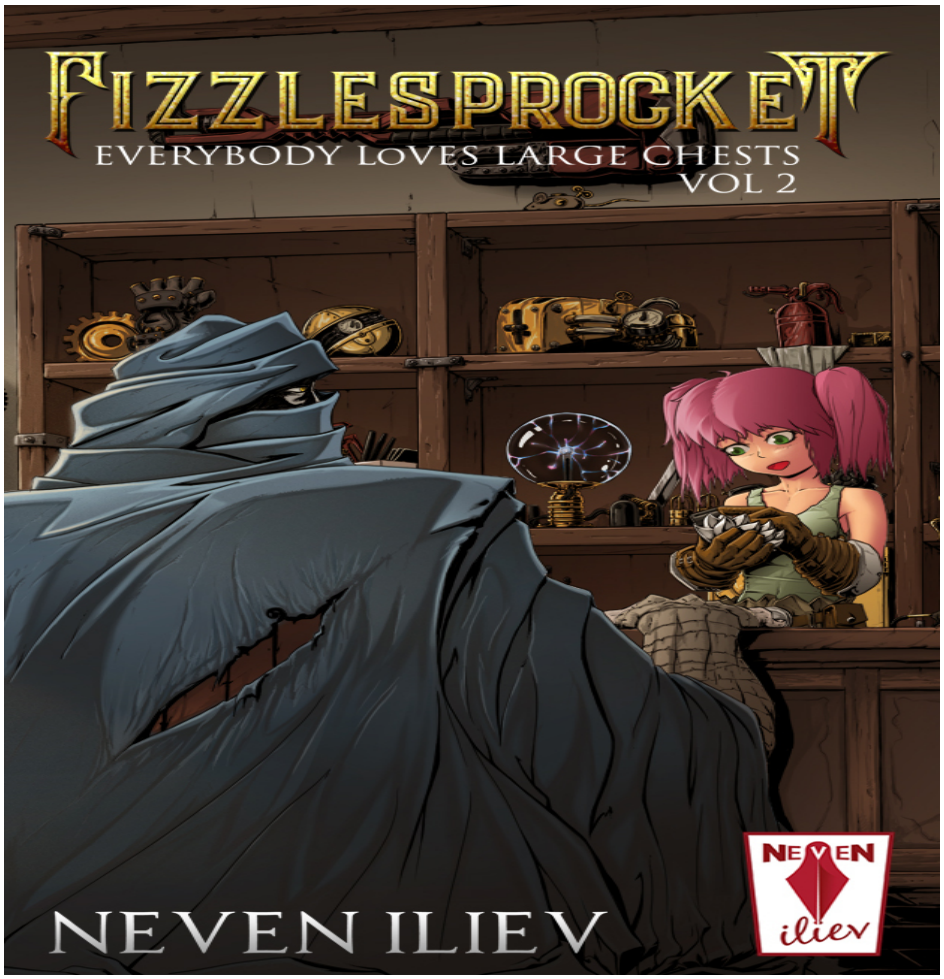
Fizzlesprocket

Everybody Loves Large Chests

Vol 2

Neven Iliev

Neven Iliev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Everybody Loves Large Chests
Volume Two: Fizzlesprocket

A book by Neven Iliev

Prologue

Chapter One
Science!!!

- Part One
- Part Two
- Part Three
- Part Four
- Part Five
- Part Six

Chapter Two
Fine Print

- Part One
- Part Two
- Part Three

Chapter Three
Gainful Employment

- Part One
- Part Two
- Part Three
- Part Four
- Part Five

- Part Six
- Part Seven
- Part Eight
- Part Nine

Interlude
That Nagging Feeling

Chapter Four
Chaos

- Part One
- Part Two
- Part Three
- Part Four
- Part Five
- Part Six

Epilogue

Afterword

Prologue

A swirling cloud of poison spiralled upwards from the smouldering ruins of a once peaceful city, now reduced to nothing but ash, dust, and death. The cause of all this devastation was an event that would eventually become known as The Calamity of Monotal. It was a disaster the likes of which had rarely been seen before and would hopefully never occur again.

“Hahahahahaha! Ahhhh- hahahahahahaaaaah!”

Yet despite all of these tragic truths, there was someone who laughed merrily at the swirling mushroom cloud. It was easy for this being to revel in the suffering of others, as he was behind the safety of a screen that relayed sounds and images to him in real time. This gave him a front-row seat to the terrifying spectacle of a supercharged dungeon core exploding without the various risks involved. Well, it wasn’t like a pseudo-nuclear detonation would even phase him, but that was beside the point.

“He actually went and did it! I didn’t think that stupid little box had it in him! Oh, wait – no, not ‘him.’ The thing’s technically an ‘it,’ isn’t it? Ah, who cares?”

The important thing was that he was among the few who had witnessed the event and lived to tell the tale. He was more involved than simply being a bystander, though. If anything, this figure could be considered the chief suspect in that catastrophe. He was also the only one who knew the full story, even more so than his unwitting chest-shaped partner in crime.

“Phew! I haven’t had that much fun in decades,” he declared in a jovial manner. “I need to re-evaluate my opinion of that mimic. If that’s the first thing it showed me, then I can’t wait to see what it does next! It’s times like these when I really love my job!”

Snap

The sound of a finger snapping rang out and a cardboard box covered in red and white vertical stripes – and positively overflowing with freshly-buttered popcorn – appeared in thin air. It was deftly caught by the mysterious observer, who sat down and leaned back into a plush red sofa. The floating screen in front of him abruptly changed to show a much less depressing scene ... one that was focused on said peculiar mimic and its two bound

familiars as they walked idly down a cobblestone road on the edge of a forest.

“Come on then, Boxxy T. Morningwood,” he exclaimed while grabbing a fistful of popcorn. “Show me what you’ve got!”

Chapter One
Science!!!

Part One

Kora, Xera, and their newly-named master made their way down the road at a leisurely pace. Boxxy had already filled up its near-bottomless stomach with woodland critters, so it was in no particular rush for once. Its familiars, however, seemed to be in the middle of a heated debate.

“You burned me up on purpose back there, didn’t you!” Kora accused.

It would appear that the towering four-armed, red-skinned fiend still had some gripes about how things went down during the attack on the former city of Monotal a few hours ago.

“Your big head just got in the way of my Fireball!” deflected the succubus, unwilling to accept any sort of blame.

“As if! I know how you backstabbing whores work! You arranged it so I’d run into those Spells face-first!”

Kora was, in fact, correct in her assumption. Normally the succubus wouldn’t be able to attack a being her contract declared as an ally without her master’s express permission. However, anything could happen in a firefight, and certain ‘accidents’ could be arranged. As for the reason she assaulted her co-contractor, it was because she felt like it. Technically speaking, they had already delivered the core at that point, so their orders were fulfilled. The humans had little to no chance of stopping it, so Xera had taken that opportunity to play a prank on Kora for a laugh.

And what better way to do that than a well-placed Fireball to the face?

“Tsk, figured me out, huh?” she muttered under her breath.

“Hey! I heard that!” Kora snapped.

“Oh yeah? What are you going to do about it? Flex at me until I die of boredom?”

“Why you – Oh! That’s right! Master! Requesting permission to smack-a-bitch!”

“Huh?”

The Mimic was doing an amazing job ignoring the conversation so far but suddenly got dragged into it.

“What this moron means to say is we want to fight each other to the death,” Xera said. They had been at each other’s throats for a while now, so she was very much looking forward to putting the uppity moron in her place.

“Ah. Okay. Just make it quick. I’m going to take a break over there.”

It didn’t particularly care about their petty issues. If they needed to beat the living daylights out of each other then it saw no reason to stop them. They were still in the forest where it had spent a few days hunting, so it knew there were no particularly dangerous enemies around. Besides, it was feeling a bit tired from running with all its might to escape that explosion, so it went over to the side of the road and sat down to rest a bit.

The two demons were already at it by that time though. Kora had taken a swing at Xera the instant Boxxy let out that casual ‘Okay.’ But the succubus had seen it coming and retreated high into the air well before the attack could reach her, much to her opponent’s chagrin.

“Urgh! Get down here so I can smash you!”

“Haha! As if!” taunted the succubus from above. “Get roasted, dumbass! Fireball!”

Kora dove to the side, avoiding the Spell completely. It struck the ground, setting the cobblestone road ablaze with magical flame.

“Fireball!”

A second one came down, which was also dodged. The third and fourth ones followed soon after. One might think that the fiend could keep dodging until her opponent ran out of steam, but that would be harder than it appeared. Unlike Shadowbolt, Fireball was a more efficient Spell with a base cost of only 20 MP. This meant that Xera, who currently had over 800 MP, could keep firing them as much as she wanted. All while flying well out of reach of her grounded opponent.

And try as she might, Kora could not dodge forever. The fifth and sixth Spells hit her in the back and shoulder. The Devouring Flames from Xera's Pyromancer Skill clung to her, draining even more of her HP. It was impossible for her to keep avoiding those until Xera ran out of MP. Even if she did, she had no way of reaching her target for a close-range attack.

Or at least, that was how things would have been before their latest summoning.

A summoned familiar's strength relied entirely on how much MP was used up to forge their physical bodies. It wouldn't be inaccurate to say that the MP spent by the Warlock was directly converted into Attributes, Skills, and Levels. The species of the demon dictated which Attributes would be the most well developed, as well as what their Main Job would be. Fiends, for example, would have a high degree of STR and END with a fair amount of AGI and DEX, but in return, their INT and WIS would be pathetically low. They would also always have the Fiend Job, which had a very strict set of Skills available to it. A special racial Skill would also be made available to them depending on what type of fiend they were. For a Pit Fiend like Kora, it meant she was 'blessed' with Idiotic Strength, which amplified her STR Attribute but neutered her INT.

So in some ways, it was safe to assume what a demon was capable of based on its species. However, that wasn't to say they were all alike. Masteries, Side Jobs, and Skills were something each individual could choose for themselves to round out their abilities. It was something that was done on their end as part of the summoning contract and could be altered at will, provided the demon was in the Beyond.

And what Kora had done prior to her latest summoning was add a new Skill to her kit. Of course, this meant all other Skills would suffer and drop in Proficiency Level to compensate, but the fiend didn't mind. Truthfully speaking, she had a feeling a bout like this would happen eventually with the succubus. And even she wasn't stupid enough to think that crafty bitch would fight her at close range. Therefore, she needed a way to attack from a distance that didn't rely on her pathetically low MP pool.

Her solution to this was simple: Projectile Mastery. It was a Skill that allowed her to turn all manner of debris around her into ammunition, and there was no shortage of debris whenever a fiend participated in battle. In

this instance, she made her own by smashing up the cobblestone road to produce as many throwable rocks as she wanted.

“Let’s see how you like these apples!”

She gripped a rock in each hand and, after a brief windup, started flinging them into the sky in rapid succession. This caught the overconfident Xera completely by surprise. She had to stop her magical barrage and fervently dodge the improvised anti-air missiles. The stones that were the size of grapefruits flew past her like they were cannon fire. She avoided two, four, six of them, but her pathetically low AGI meant she could not keep it going for long. One of the projectiles caught her in the knee, which threw her off balance. Another one tore right through one of her wings, breaking it in half and rendering it useless.

The demoness screamed in pain as she fell out of the sky, landing with a painful faceplant on the grassy plain next to the road. She was about to pick herself up when Kora’s armoured boot dug into her ribs.

“Gufu!”

The force of the impact lifted the succubus off the ground and sent her flying like she was a pile of dirty laundry. She hit the ground once more some six metres away, skidding and rolling along the grassy soil until she stopped with her back against the ground. The unbearably delicious pain from her side kindly informed her she likely had a few shattered ribs. The same metal-clad foot that put her in this position then stomped down on her chest.

“Give up yet, cunt?” said Kora triumphantly while crossing her arms.

“As if!” said Xera as she coughed up some blood. “I’ll never admit defeat to a lucky shot like that! You petulant bitch!”

Kora raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? I wonder what your bones have to say about this!”

She moved her armoured boot and pressed down on the same spot she’d kicked moments ago, aggravating the fracture. The weight she put into that limb also pushed the succubus’s injured wing into the ground, causing her double the agony. With so much pain shooting through Xera at once, there was no way she wouldn’t show a reaction.

“Hyaaaahaaaaaah!” Xera screamed. Her body visibly shuddered and shook for several seconds, especially the area around her nether regions.

Kora did not miss her strange response. That scream was expected, but it was still way too high pitched. Not the kind of voice one would normally let out while being tortured. No, that noise was almost like –

“Did you just … climax from having your broken bones stepped on?”

“No! Hahn! There’s no such thing! Yahnn!”

There was no way Kora believed that extremely unconvincing response, as it was obvious Xera was getting off on the pain. She had always assumed succubi were just a bunch of perverts and deviants, but even then had trouble believing they would be *this* depraved.

Determined to find out the truth for herself, Kora knelt down on the ground while straddling the succubus’s knees. She pinned Xera’s arms with two of her hands while a third one reached down and roughly tore off the blue-skinned beauty’s bikini bottom. She was met with a pair of lips that glistened with moisture.

“You’re practically flooded down there! So you *did* have an orgasm!”

Xera averted her gaze in shame. This served only to infuriate Kora.

“You SLLLUUUUT!” she yelled before half punching, half slapping Xera across the face.

She had no idea what was going on, other than she was absolutely disgusted with this creature beneath her.

“Why are you getting off on being hit?” she continued with another hit. “You fucking whore! We were supposed to be *fighting* here!”

“S-shut up!” Xera spat back. “I don’t need to listen to any of this shit! Just fucking get it over with and kill me already!”

“Yeah you’d want that, wouldn’t you? You’d certainly enjoy it, right?”

“Fuck you!”

“No, fuck *you*!”

“Fireball!”

The succubus hit the fiend with a Spell straight to the face. The towering demon staggered backwards as she roared in pain. Xera managed to squirm out of Kora's grasp and put some distance between them, starting off round two of the one-on-one fight.

She still needed some time to mend her wing with shapeshifting; she wasn't as good at it as a certain murderous box, but once she accomplished that, this fight would be hers. All she had to do was avoid getting caught like before and she would be in the clear. Her opponent naturally wanted to keep that from happening, so she chased after Xera immediately.

As for their master, it was idly watching them go at each other. It had to admit, it had been curious as to how they would fight one another, and it was learning a lot by observing them. Snack's underhanded methods were particularly enlightening, although she did end up getting caught and pinned to the ground again soon afterwards. This showed that no amount of cunning or trickery would save someone from an opponent possessing overwhelming strength. True, Snack and Arms were made from the same MP, but the former had Skills and Attributes geared towards deception and infiltration, while the latter was a pure-blooded fighter.

It was then that the Mimic noticed the two demons were making weird sounds. The succubus was moaning and wailing, the fiend was grunting loudly, and there was a rhythmic noise of flesh slapping against flesh. Taking a closer look at the grappling duo, it was able to see that Arms was stabbing Snack's lower end with a body part that she really shouldn't have.

Something long, hard and veiny.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Beep ... Beep ... Beep

Click

"Hello. You have reached Demons 'R' Us. My name is Carl and I'll be your liaison for today."

"Hey Carl, me again."

"Ah, if it isn't my favourite client! What can I do for you, buddy?"

"The fiend you gave me. I think it's broken."

“Oh? What makes you say that?”

“It was supposed to be female, but it has a thing that only males have.”

Boxxy might have been a completely asexual monster, but it had eaten more than enough people to differentiate between the genders on a biological level. However, Arms was currently showing off something it had never seen before: the presence of genitalia from both sexes. This perplexed the Mimic quite a bit, to the point where it decided to call upon the one responsible for managing its summoning contracts to get some clarification.

“That’s just standard fare for fiends,” replied Carl. “You see, those guys and gals thrive on violence and dominating others. They achieve this either by overwhelming their opponent in combat or through what mortals refer to as ‘rape.’ Females especially love doing that second thing, which is why their bodies come equipped with the, uh, best tool for the job. Bottom line is, her actions and appearances are perfectly natural for her kind.”

“Ah … what’s rape?”

“It should be whatever Koralenteprix is currently doing over there. Their ‘special equipment’ only pops out of their bodies when they’re about to use it, after all.”

“Is rape tasty?”

“I … uh … That’s not something within my contractual obligations to answer.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Then will that be all for now?”

“Yes.”

“Roger that. Thanks again for calling Demons ‘R’ Us. Please do not hesitate to call with any strictly demon-related inquiries you may have. Buh-bye.”

Click

Boxxy settled down and turned its attention back to its familiars, who were still going at it. It observed them for a while longer until it came to a definitive conclusion: rape did not appear to be tasty in the slightest. It was a messy and horribly inefficient combat strategy, to say the least. Even though Arms appeared to be attacking Snack, the latter was hardly taking

any damage. In fact, given the succubus's Energy Drain Skill, she was actually recovering her strength through the act by sapping the life force of her assailant. Granted, it wasn't as effective since her opponent was a demon of considerable stamina, but it was still doing work. If things kept going on in this way, the fiend would end up being a lifeless husk like those four adventurers back in the dungeon.

And indeed, after performing the lewd act for a solid fifteen minutes and driving the masochistic succubus to a total of eight climaxes, the fiend finally reached her own release. Her male part discharged impossible amounts of a mysterious white fluid, which was eagerly absorbed by Xera's lower end. It wasn't until ten minutes later that Kora's supernaturally prolonged climax came to an end. She had only about 120 HP remaining, but she was still very much alive. Being able to survive intercourse with a succubus was nothing if not a testament to her demonic constitution. She wasn't quite sure how things turned out like this, though, as her head was all a blur.

And now that it was starting to clear up, Kora looked down at the buxom succubus beneath her. All of the broken bones and bruises she'd inflicted on Xera – both prior to and during the lewd act – had healed up, leaving her in perfect physical condition. It also seemed like she'd recovered from her own sex-fuelled craze much faster than Kora, as evidenced by the staff she was pointing directly at the shocked fiend's face.

Technically speaking, the duel hadn't quite ended yet.

"Fireball!"

The direct point-blank hit to the face engulfed Kora's head in flames, knocking it backwards. She yelled in rage and pain but had trouble moving her body on account of it being weakened so much by the blue-skinned pervert. A second Fireball came moments later, robbing the last vestiges of her HP and killing her while still joined with the succubus.

Xera then finally caught her breath. Even if her body had recovered its HP, her stamina was another story. She wallowed in the soggy dirt for a while before standing up and stretching her sore body while the fiend's physical shell evaporated into thin air. She then dressed herself with a snap of her

fingers – or at least as ‘dressed’ as one could be in fetish wear like hers – and walked over to where the Mimic was sitting.

“Master, the duel is over,” she said matter-of-factly.

The animate chest sprouted some weird noodle-like appendages from its underside and tipped over backwards. It seemed it had grown bored of their antics and fell asleep without realising it. After all, it had a full belly and was basking in the warm sun while sitting on the soft grass. It had even found the rhythmic slapping of flesh its familiars made while pounding each other to be oddly calming, almost hypnotic. All things considered, it was almost inevitable that it would end up dozing off under these circumstances.

Boxxy still had a ways to go before it conquered sleeping.

Still, now that it was awake and rested, it wanted to get back on the road. It righted itself and promptly summoned back Kora. Once it confirmed they were both done with their little grudge match, it ordered them to continue escorting it and went on its merry way.

“Argh!” groaned Kora once they started walking again. “I can’t believe I lost to you! This sucks!”

“W-well,” stammered Xera. “To be perfectly honest, it felt more like a draw to me.”

“Huh? What the shit are you talking about? You killed me, didn’t you?”

“That did happen, yes. However, while I may have triumphed over you as a demon, I also completely lost to you as a woman.”

Much like Xera was Kora’s first succubus, the opposite was also true. Xera had never had intercourse with a fiend before and she was surprised to find just how much she enjoyed the violent act. That blasted chest may have been the cause of her new ‘eccentricities,’ but it was this fiend that had inadvertently helped her come to terms with that new side of herself.

Therefore, she had no qualms admitting that Kora had managed to completely satisfy her in every way imaginable. Admittedly, that was only because the fiend was incredibly rough and abusive, but that was precisely what got Xera off. So much so that she decided to cast away the last vestiges of her pride and dignity and fully give in to those newfound carnal

desires. After all, the main reason she came to this world was to have fun, so there was really no reason to deny herself that sort of pleasure.

Kora crossed her arms and frowned. “I don’t get it. How do you lose as a woman?”

Xera let out a sigh. For a moment she’d forgotten just how dense fiends could be. There was no way her co-contractor would be able to determine what she was trying to say if she used roundabout means. Since playing coy wasn’t going to get through Kora’s thick skull, Xera took the direct approach.

“I’m saying I really enjoyed it when you pushed me down and fucked my brains out.”

“Good for you, Slutty McSlutface. I had a good bit of fun too.”

“Then how about giving it another go sometime?”

“ … You know what, I was thinking the same thing. I’ve never cum like that before; it was pretty intense. Your head’s more rotten than a year-old tomato, but you got a juicy cunt that just won’t quit.”

“I could say the same about you and your dumb-as-rocks-brain. Plus, your breath smells like brimstone and your movements are about as graceful as a drunk hippo. In fact, your cock’s the only halfway decent thing about you. It would be best for everyone involved if you could just disappear but leave that dick behind.”

Xera’s snide attitude immediately made Kora’s already short temper flare up. If that bitch wanted to get wrecked so much, then she was certainly in the right place. Sure, she’d be giving her what she wanted, but it would still make the fiend feel better.

“Master! Requesting permission to punch the bitch in the face and then rape her in the pussy! Not necessarily in that order!”

Boxxy, who was currently contemplating whether the left or right side of a human was more delicious, simply shrugged its non-existent shoulders.

“Only if you can do that while walking.”

“Oh, that’s fine then,” said Kora. She cracked her knuckles, meeting Xera’s trademark grin with a toothy smile of her own. “I’m sure I’ll find a way.”

Part Two

“Dark Explosion ~♪!”

There was a swirling of dust, shadows, and sparkling particles. A few seconds passed and a small object materialized out of thin air. It was a twelve-sided polygonal shape, also known as a dodecahedron, which appeared to be made out of thick, clear glass. Inside the ten centimetre wide object was a small, twisting cloud of pitch-black smog that looked as if someone had bottled a tiny typhoon. The conjured item floated in place while spinning around slowly in no particular direction.

Boxxy’s imitation Xera hand reached out and grasped the newly formed Spell Crystal. Its first impression was that holding it felt odd. It was definitely gripping something solid, but there was no other sensation to it. The tender fingers relayed no change in temperature and could not make out the texture of the thing they were touching, yet they clearly felt the pressure of something within their grasp. This would probably be what it was like to grasp solid air.

Still, it wasn’t slippery and had some heft to it, which made the Mimic a bit more confident about handling these things. It had already practised a few times by using the non-lethal Mass Panic Spell. It wasn’t like the damage from a single misfired Dark Explosion would kill it, but it would still hurt. The initial hit did as much as two Shadowbolts’ worth of damage and the concussive force that followed was not to be underestimated, either.

This was the first time the Mimic had attempted to use its latest Warlock-derived Skill on a damaging Spell, so it was quite pleased it went so swimmingly.

[Crystallize Magic]
Binds magic Spells to a more permanent form, allowing it to be stored for later use
Requirements: Level 15 Caster Job, INT 90, WIS 60
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 0 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]

The next Area Effect Spell will have its MP Cost increased by 25%.
The next Area Effect Spell will be stored temporarily inside a conjured Spell Crystal.
Shattering a Spell Crystal will unleash the stored Area Effect Spell.
Spell Crystals will last up to 6 minutes per Level of this Skill before disappearing.

Learning the practical applications and limits of these Spell Crystals through trial and error filled Boxxy with a distinct feeling of satisfaction that bordered on tasty. It was so proud of itself for having fulfilled this basic task that the solidified piece of magic in its grasp actually looked surprisingly shiny. Not in the literal sense, but more in the 'I can't eat it but it still looks useful' sort of way. Hence the smile on the imitation Xera's lips. It was an innocent, happy smile that seemed to say all was right with the world – a goofy grin only matched by the times when it was playing around with its gold coins.

Unfortunately, it couldn't allow itself to play around. It had things it wanted to do. Besides, there would be plenty of time for recreational activities once its MP had been exhausted and it had to wait for it to recover.

"Arms," it called telepathically, "stop playing with Snack and come here."

"Aw man," exclaimed Kora. "I was just getting to the good part!"

The fiend yanked violently on Xera's silky hair, pulling the succubus's head away from her groin. It was regrettable that the face-fucking was cut short, but it was a direct order so it couldn't be helped. Kora retracted her absurdly sized member back inside her body, pulled up her short shorts and went over to see what her master wanted.

All things considered though, only a demon that was never satisfied would complain under the current circumstances. The two familiars had managed to work out a 'standing sex order' whereby they were allowed to engage in promiscuous activity whenever they were idle. Kora was even allowed to physically abuse the succubus for their mutual enjoyment, but only on the condition that Xera didn't drop below three-quarters of her HP. They still had to ask special permission for the full-blown back-breaking, ball-busting, and bone-crushing sex since that always ended with one of them dead.

Boxxy did not care what those two did in their free time, but it had no intention to waste MP because of their shenanigans.

“I’m here, Master,” said Kora with a hint of frustration in her voice.

“Here, hold this.”

It tossed the crystallized Dark Explosion at her, and the fiend caught it deftly with one of her massive hands. She lifted it up to her face and looked at it curiously.

“Another one of these things, huh? This one seems a bit different though.”

A Spell Crystal’s transparent shell looked the same no matter what, but the captured magic within took on a different appearance depending on the Spell used. The Mass Panic ones the fiend had handled earlier contained a semi-transparent purple skull rather than the swirling vortex of pure darkness she was currently holding.

“Use it on Snack,” ordered Boxxy.

Kora glanced towards Xera, who was on her back some twenty metres away, wallowing in the dirt and gasping for air and sporting a black eye and broken collarbone.

“Alright,” answered Kora with a shrug. She wasn’t sure what that box was doing, but she didn’t really care, either. She mumbled something under her breath and threw the crystal at her target with a shout of “Hey, Slutinator!”

“Huh?”

The succubus lifted her head and turned her attention towards the fiend –

THWACK

– just in time for the Spell Crystal to hit her in the forehead. Her noggin recoiled from the impact and slammed back into the ground while the offending projectile ricocheted off it and flew straight up into the air.

“Think fast!” yelled Kora, well after the fact.

The fiend seemed quite pleased with her little prank, if the evil smile on her face was any indication. Then again, it would be really difficult for a fiend to make a non-evil smile. They loved to bare their sharp, pointy teeth so much that 90% of the time they gave off the impression they wanted to eat

someone's baby. Of course, that wasn't actually true, as fiends had an appetite for destruction and bloodshed, not human flesh. Besides, even if they did, stringy infants that were gone in one or two bites would hardly be worth the annoyance caused by their tiny bones getting stuck between the teeth.

The point was that this toothy grin was indicative of Kora's purpose, as she had a feeling her co-contractor would be annoyed by her actions. And judging from how the succubus sat back up and glared daggers at her seemed to prove Kora's guess was right. Even if she had learned to embrace and savour the pain, Xera still wasn't a fan of surprises like those. She was also equally unamused when the Spell Crystal that had bounced off her forehead seconds ago inevitably came back down. It broke apart the instant it touched the ground next to her and released the stored Dark Explosion Spell.

Ka-PANNNN

A black, barely visible shockwave over six metres in diameter radiated from within the shattered crystal at a speed too fast for the eye to track. The strength of the blast was enough to turn the slightly trampled ground into a small crater. As for the succubus, she took 253 HP worth of damage, but that wasn't the end of it. Her surprisingly light body was flung through the air at such a low angle that it was almost parallel to the grassy ground. She flew for a dozen or so metres before bouncing once, then twice, and finally slamming to a stop face-first into a giant boulder.

"Whoa! I wonder if she's still alive," exclaimed Kora, though her inquiry was more out of curiosity than concern. Then she heard a throaty moan coming from Xera's direction, which promptly reminded her exactly who it was that had been sent flying.

"Yeah, she'll be fine," was the obvious conclusion.

As for Boxxy, it was satisfied to confirm that a Spell Crystal's magical fail-safes behaved the same regardless of the Spell used. Under normal circumstances, the conjured item remained inert and would not release the magic stored within no matter what. Even if it expired or was smashed open, which incidentally required a good deal of effort, all that would happen was that the stored Spell would fizzle out harmlessly.

The only way to make it explode was to chant a magical command word while holding it. Three seconds after doing so, the crystal would become armed and detonate the instant it came into contact with something solid. Therefore, the Mimic was free to keep them in its Storage or have its familiars carry them around without worry of personal injury. It just wished it knew about this stuff before picking up the Skill, because it felt like it had pointlessly agonized over having to decide between Crystallize Magic and Demonology.

Still, Arms was quite instrumental in delivering the big shiny thing to the place with the walls and the humans. If it wasn't for that, then Boxxy wouldn't have been able to reap all the tasty benefits of the subsequent explosion.

The next thing the Mimic did was check its Crystallize Magic and Ruin Mastery Skills, but neither had gained any proficiency. That was more or less to be expected, really. In essence, attacking its own familiars was like hitting itself, which wouldn't confer an increase to Job or Skill Levels. It had to fight viable targets if it hoped to do that, but the problem was that there were no such things around. It had been travelling along this road for quite a few hours now, so it expected to see at least *something* it could murder the life out of.

Ironically, even though Boxxy had no way of knowing this, the current situation was more or less its own doing. Animals, monsters, and people alike in a large area around the former city of Monotal had either run away or hidden themselves in fear. A natural reaction considering that inexplicable yet terrifying explosion. The shockwave could be felt dozens of kilometres away and the blinding flash it produced went beyond even that. The top of the ominous mushroom cloud had also reached so high in the air that it was clearly visible on the horizon. The fact that the pale green gas seemed to be steadily expanding rather than clearing up was just another reason for the forest's inhabitants to vacate the area out of fear.

Unfortunately for Boxxy, it had no way of deducing all this. That explosion was back then and happened way over there. It therefore failed to understand how it could possibly affect the here and now.

"Master?" said Kora, interrupting the animate chest's train of thought. "What happens if you do the glowy thing while making those boom-

bottles?”

“Glowy thing?”

“Yeah! Like when you become all like ‘khrakakakoom’ and then it’s all ‘bzzt bzzt bzzt’ and your magic becomes really fucking strong!”

“Ohhh!”

The Mimic hadn’t thought of combining its Skills like that until now. The MP cost was a bit prohibitive, but since its MP was back to full and there were no dangers around, it figured it might as well give it a shot. It activated Power Overwhelming, allowing itself to be wrapped in an aura of volatile energy. This was immediately accompanied by the same feeling of unease it got every time it did so. The shapeshifter wasn’t sure why, but the lights and noises coming off its own body made it uncomfortable and agitated. Unsettled, even.

That was why it wasted no more time and activated Crystallize Magic, then immediately chanted its Spell.

“Dark Explosion ~♪!”

A whopping 770 MP was consumed over the span of a few seconds. The sudden strain on its MP pool was both disorienting and draining to the point where Boxxy staggered and nearly fell over. It had felt a similar sensation when it used every last drop of its MP to take down the Fleshmaiden from yesterday. It would seem this phenomenon wasn’t a fluke caused by its already exhausted and weakened state at the time, but a negative side effect it needed to be wary of.

The Spell Crystal was formed without issue, though. It looked exactly like the last one, only it had a tinier version of the Power Overwhelming Skill’s crackling aura mixed in with the swirling vortex inside the crystal. The Mimic grabbed it out of the air and handed it to Kora once again.

“Hehehe … I can’t wait to see this baby blow!” said the fiend with an expectant smile. “Okay, where do we –”

“Stand there and don’t move,” commanded the Mimic. It backed off to a distance of about fifteen metres. “Okay. Now turn it on and put it at your feet.”

Kora broke out in a cold sweat. It appeared to be her turn as the test subject. She unwillingly armed the crystal and dropped it on the ground next to her. She then realised that she could get away since her master hadn't actually told her to –

"Stand still and let it hit you," Boxxy ordered, seeming to predict what the fiend was about to do.

"Well, so much for that idea," grumbled Kora.

And as the impossibly long three seconds ticked by, the fiend finally started to understand what Xera was talking about when she blamed her 'eccentricities' on their master. That deceptively deadly box was a genius at causing suffering to everyone around it. It was so good at it that it had somehow shattered the psyche of a demon that was several hundred years old. A feat almost as difficult as wiping out an entire city in a single day.

This realisation worried Kora quite a bit, as she didn't want to think what *she* would turn into if she had been put through the same wringer. Thankfully the fiend's master didn't find her tasty, so that scenario was highly unlikely to happen. This conclusion made her extremely relieved, but that feeling didn't last long.

The three seconds had run out.

Click

"Ah, fu–"

KA-DOOOOOOOOOOONNNNNNN

[Your target has been blown away. HP -911.]

This blast was incomparable to the previous one. Everything and everyone within its area of effect was completely and utterly demolished. While the previous blast made a small dent in the landscape, this one caused an upheaval that drastically changed the terrain, flinging dirt and countless stones in every direction.

[You have suffered a series of cuts and lacerations. HP -65.]
[You have suffered minor blunt trauma. HP -34.]
[You have been impaled. HP -58.]

Shrapnel-like pebbles pelted Boxxy, covering it in numerous wounds and digging into its body. It was also struck by two large stones. One of them slammed into the Mimic's chest-shaped lower half while the other, pointier rock stabbed the imitation Xera poking out of it through the gut. The monster hissed and screamed as yellow blood sprayed from its wounds. It had distanced itself specifically to avoid this sort of thing, but it had clearly underestimated the forces it was playing with and suffered for it.

When the gust of wind and debris died down, it pulled the foreign matter stuck in its flesh out and moved its body mass around to seal the wounds. It then finally undid the half-Xera portion of its transformation and returned to its preferred arachno-chest shape. As expected, having a whole human body sticking out of itself simply made it a bigger target. If it had been just a chest at the start, then it would have suffered significantly less damage. Come to think of it, did it really have to expose itself like that just to use magic?

Actually, no, it didn't. It had been chanting just fine before it somehow picked up that habit. It was true that being able to wield a staff boosted its magic somewhat, but overall it really wasn't worth it. At least not at the expense of making itself more vulnerable. Ah, but there was more to this magic thing than just damage. Uttering arcane incantations that invoked Spells was much easier done with a human's mouth than a mimic's maw. Meaning that the speed of its Spell slinging would drop noticeably if it were to avoid taking on a half-human form.

Then again, it didn't really need the entire body, right? Surely it would be enough to grow only the head. Or better yet, how about just the mouth? No, that wouldn't work since the voice box was in the throat. Then there was the inescapable need for lungs if it wanted to do things properly. One thing was for certain though: Boxxy would need to rethink its shapeshifting habits if it hoped to optimize its usage of magic without making itself an easier target.

"Master?" called out Xera. "W-what happened here?"

Now this was a surprise. Boxxy had completely written the succubus off as a corpse, yet here she was, alive and kicking, even if just barely. Most of her left side was, for lack of a better word, a bloody pulp, though the demon herself didn't seem to mind it. She'd probably be grinning and panting in an

obscene manner if her attention wasn't being consumed by the devastation caused by the Mimic's magical experiment.

"I used the shiny Spell. It was a bit too strong."

"A bit you say …"

Xera stared disbelievingly at the crater some fifteen metres away. It had gouged out a significant portion of the ground, leaving behind a hemisphere-shaped hole over six metres in diameter.

"Where's, uhm, Arms?"

"Over there," responded Boxxy, pointing to the side with one of its spider legs. "And there. And there. Oh, there too!"

"Uwaah … How luck– I mean, uh, what a terrible way to die."

Even if she had decided to embrace that masochistic side of herself, Xera still wanted to avoid revealing it to her master. If that chest figured out pain was more of a reward rather than a punishment, it was liable to come up with some other way to torture her. Therefore, she wanted to maintain this status quo for as long as possible to feed her perversions. Luckily for her, Boxxy was especially dense when it came to social cues, so it was likely her current arrangement would continue for some time.

"Not dead."

"… Huh?"

"Not dead," repeated Boxxy. "At least not yet."

"What do you mean, Master?"

Xera had barely uttered those words when her ears started picking up on an odd sound.

"… uuuuuuuh–"

It sounded like the fiend's voice, but why was it so distant? No, wait ... wasn't it getting closer at a terrifying rate? Looking up, Xera saw Kora – or at least what was left of her – as she was plummeting towards the nearby cobblestone road.

"–uuuuuuuUUUUUUU**UUUUCK**!"

SPLAT

[Your familiar has been banished.]

"*Now*, she's dead," said the Mimic matter-of-factly.

That was an understatement. The familiar had splattered against the road as if she were an overripe tomato thrown against a wall. Her head was cracked open and her black blood was all over the place. What was left of her torso was tenderized into a paste. The only things still attached to it were the remains of her head and a total of two arms. Well, most of one and two elbow-length stumps if one were to be more specific. Everything from the waist down had been turned into a bloody mist that had already evaporated into nothingness.

Xera's only reaction to this gruesome spectacle was to shudder with delight when she imagined just how much that ordeal must have hurt.

"Let's go," ordered Boxxy as Kora's leftovers disappeared into thin air. "I have to find dinner."

Something about using so much magic in rapid succession had made it work up a killer appetite.

Part Three

A caravan of three horse-drawn carriages had been on the road for the past three days. The first of them was a stagecoach capable of carrying six people and their personal belongings. The other two wagons were transporting cargo. One of them had barrels and crates loaded with all manner of food leftover from the winter season: salted meats, smoked fish, dried fruits, mouldy cheese, pickled vegetables, delicious jams, and other preserved goods. Alcohol was also present in the form of four kegs of top-quality dwarven beer and one crate of less-than-top-quality elven wine, all of which were imported from other nations. The third vehicle in the convoy held a number of general goods such as ropes, clothing, tools, cutlery, and various raw materials such as timber, magical herbs, and iron.

Overall, the caravan was carrying goods with a total market value of about 3,300 GP – a tempting target should a group of well-coordinated,

unscrupulous individuals decide they wanted it for themselves. Which was precisely why the merchant that owned this caravan hired a total of thirteen adventurers as armed escorts. Nine of them were keeping pace with the convoy on foot while the rest were riding aboard the carriages where they and their weapons were clearly visible.

Usually a show of force like this would be enough to deter bandits. After all, even though common criminals were not all that bright, they weren't stupid enough to start a fight where their lives would be at serious risk. No matter how sweet a prize, they wouldn't get a single taste of it if they were dead. That was why such cowardly vagabonds did not dare attack their victims unless they had an overwhelming advantage that would secure a quick and easy win.

Like, for example, having a large group of thirty or so bloodthirsty men ambush the convoy and use their superior numbers to quickly overwhelm the defenders and seize the loot. Which was more or less exactly what the local bandit gang tried to do. They picked a spot on the road where one side of it had a thick forest with tall trees that would serve both as high ground and cover. On the other side of the Imperial highway was a sheer twenty-metre drop into an overgrown canyon, complete with furious whitewater rapids. Any fools stupid enough to risk that fall in an effort to escape would either smash their heads open on the jagged rocks or drown in that unforgiving current.

And so, with their plan in place and their target in sight, the bandits began their ambush by firing on the caravan out of the forest.

"Bandits! Incoming!"

A flurry of arrows and Spells rained down on the adventurers, but someone had managed to spot them moments before they attacked. It was far too late for the caravan to escape, but the Shaman and Wizard in the group still had enough time to deploy countermeasures.

"Wind Wall!"

"Spell Shield!"

An impossible gust of wind knocked physical projectiles off course while a bright purple bubble repelled the offensive magic. Unfortunately, their defences could not cover the entire convoy, so a number of attacks ended up

on target. A combination of Acid Javelins and Shadowbolts struck the lead carriage at once, knocking it over and blocking the road. The horses flew into a frenzy and bucked wildly, threatening to wreck the two cargo wagons.

The redheaded human Ranger that served as leader of the armed escort quickly flew into action. She ordered her comrades to take cover behind the cargo wagons, with the canyon to their backs. She wanted to confirm the safety of the passenger in the lead carriage, but that seemed to be a lost cause. The bloodied, lifeless hand that stuck out from inside the melting wreckage was more than enough proof that their client had died, which she took quite hard.

The whole point of putting them in front was that so that they could escape while the bandits and adventurers fought over the cargo towards the rear. They had even targeted the horses, despite the fact that those were arguably as valuable as the goods themselves. However, the Ranger immediately understood why this bunch was so bloodthirsty when she noticed their leader. He was a towering man well over two metres in height, with scruffy ginger hair and a nasty diagonal scar across his face.

Although the Ranger failed to recognize him, this man was known as Makren the Red. He was a wanted criminal who was just as ruthless as he looked. He made it a point to attack the civilians, as there was still profit to be made from looting their personal belongings. Granted, it would be nowhere near as much as the trade goods they were transporting, but it was still worth an extra prize. The only problem was that such practices earned him a lot of notoriety. This attracted some truly monstrous bounty hunters who were after the price on his head, and he was forced to abandon his old turf. He had only recently relocated to these parts, knowing full well that the locals would be no match for him and his gang.

“Damn that bitch,” he cursed under his breath. “Guess she’s not as green as she looks.”

He had underestimated his fellow redhead, as the Ranger’s snap judgement to use the cargo wagons for cover had been spot on. He had men to feed and equipment to manage, and this had been their first big score since coming to Cradle Valley. His gang would challenge his leadership if he didn’t take care of them, so he had no choice but to prioritize the supplies.

“Stop firing on the loot, you bastards!” he shouted. “You lot – go and encircle them!”

The barrage of arrows and Spells died down, and a group of twenty or so heavily armed men stepped forward and spread out to surround the caravan. They all wore mismatched equipment, ranging from pieces of full plate that belonged to the Imperial army to the sort of chainmail and padded leather armour typical for newbie adventurers. It was clearly gear pilfered from their previous victims, with the higher ranking among them getting the best bits.

However, regardless of how much their equipment varied from person to person, all of them had one thing in common. Each bandit wore a dark red cowl, hood, headband, or bandana – likely intended to be some sort of identifying gang sign. They also moved with a certain amount of coordination, which suggested they had been training in mixed unit tactics. This was extremely strange for criminal rabble like that. Then again, their thorough preparations were precisely the reason why their ambush had been so effective.

Once their half-encirclement was complete, they moved forward in a threatening manner, stopping some fifteen metres away from the adventurers. The atmosphere was tense, as neither side seemed willing to break the sudden standoff. The bandits were waiting for their leader’s command while the adventurers were busy catching their breaths. Even if the Ranger had spotted the attack, it had still been way too sudden, so her side took this opportunity to regroup and formulate a strategy.

“Listen up, snowflakes!” shouted Makren. “We just want the loot! Leave it behind peacefully and we will not give chase! Nobody else has to die here!”

They would definitely win the fight if it came to that, but it was highly likely the bandits would suffer casualties. Even though they outnumbered those people nearly three to one, their enemy was still a band of adventurers. It might have been another story if their ambush had succeeded and they had taken out three or four of them, but that blasted Ranger had ruined the ‘surprise.’ The criminals only managed to injure three of them, but the damage done was nothing the party’s healers couldn’t deal with.

“Yeah, right!” she yelled back. “As if anyone would trust a bunch of lowlifes like you!”

“Be reasonable, honey! Your people ain’t got a chance!”

“Then come and get us, you dickless turds!”

Makren sighed. He really hated those heroic types who never backed down. It was always the hard way with those insufferable people. To make matters worse, he really wasn’t lying about letting them go. Engaging a well-oiled team of adventurers in open combat was a terrifying prospect. They were people who fought dangerous monsters and beasts on a near-daily basis. The difference in quality between a bandit gang and an adventuring party was almost like heaven and earth, which was exactly why Makren made his men train together regularly. Having been an adventurer himself, he knew the value of solid teamwork and strong leadership.

“Come on, boss!” said one of his subordinates. “Let’s go shut that bitch up real good!”

“Yeah,” chimed in the fellow next to him. “Enough with this diplomancy bullcrap!”

His fellow bandits, however, lacked that sort of insight. They failed to understand that the adventurers leaving peacefully would have been the best resolution to this sub-par ambush. None of his men would die and they’d keep all the loot. True, they’d leave witnesses alive, but their crime would be noticed sooner or later anyway when the caravan failed to report. And if the bounty hunters became a problem again, they’d just relocate to some other region.

That path was now closed to him, however. He was left with three options.

First was to try to flush out the adventurers, and keep the cargo as intact as possible. They would reap the most profit, but his men would end up questioning his leadership if a lot of them ended up dying over it. This was the best short-term solution but would sow seeds of discontent among the survivors, which would likely become trouble further down the line.

The second was to bombard the carts from afar with magic. Their magic users would try to ward off the ranged attacks, but their MP would not hold out for long. This way they would suffer the least casualties but also have

very little to show for their trouble. Some smart-arses would probably question his decision anyway, but he could just counter with how they were still alive because of it.

And the final option was to simply give up on the profits and withdraw – a sure-fire way to have his men turn on him, have a bounty put out on his head, *and* lose out on all the loot. He wasn't even considering it, but it was still technically a choice, no matter how terrible it was.

"Have it your way then!" he shouted. "Boys!"

Having made his decision, Makren lifted an arm above his head. Everyone – bandit and adventurer alike – went silent in anticipation of what would undoubtedly be the order to re-start the battle. The tension in the air was so thick you could cut it with a knife.

Wait, wasn't this *too* quiet? The bandit leader could have sworn he still heard the odd bird call or distant roars of monsters while they were preparing their ambush. In fact, the forest's denizens had gotten particularly noisy ever since the sky lit up and the ground shook several hours ago. And yet they were now quiet. In the middle of a spring day, that entire section of the overgrown forest was completely and utterly silent aside from the muffled splashing of the nearby river.

"Boss! On the road – look!"

One of the bandits pointed in the direction that led towards the city of Monotal. Makren followed his finger and saw it easily. How could he not? A nearly three-metre tall, red-skinned, four-armed and metal-horned pile of muscle and anger was running towards them at full sprint. He'd have to be blind in both eyes to not notice *that*. It was about a hundred metres away but was closing in fast.

"W-What is that!"

"What do we do, boss?"

The bandits were understandably shaken. It was not every day one met a demon in the wild. Especially not one that seemed to be running without a master.

"Calm down, you shits!" shouted Makren. "That thing's nothing to be scared of! Just don't let it get close – open fire and turn it into a puddle!"

His men raised a cheer in anticipation of the upcoming barrage of arrows and magic. It wasn't until a few later that it dawned on them that such a thing wasn't going to come.

"… Huh? What are those assholes doing!"

Their leader looked towards the forest, just in time to see a small transparent shape fly out. It was a perfect dodecahedron with a tiny transparent skull inside it. It fell on the ground, right in the middle of a cluster of his men. It then cracked open and released a wailing, piercing screech that was loud enough to rock one to their core.

[Your target has been crippled by fear for 6 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 7 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 6 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 8 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 5 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 7 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 8 seconds.]
[Your target has been crippled by fear for 5 seconds.]
[Proficiency level increased. Crystallize Magic is now Level 2. INT +2. WIS +2.]

Boxxy was extremely satisfied with the results of its first field test of the crystallized Mass Panic Spell. The spike in MP cost was well worth the additional range the combination afforded. The duration of the effect was somewhat random since it varied from person to person. At the very least it stuck to a range between five and eight seconds, so it wasn't entirely unpredictable.

As for the actual impact the Spell was having on the Mimic's targets, it was just as tasty as the monster expected.

"Aaaah!"

"Save me! I don't wanna die!"

"Mommy! I'm sorry! Mommy!"

The ensuing chaos of that distraction was both scarily effective and effectively scary. About a third of the red-clothed humans were either curled up in a ball and wetting themselves or running away at full speed due to the

magically induced panic attack. And fear was contagious. Even if it wasn't 'real,' the sudden wailing and crying, combined with Kora charging at them like a gigantic woman-shaped battering ram, made the rest of them visibly shaken.

And speaking of the muscular fiend, she seemed to have finally reached their panicking front line.

"Here comes the pain, bitch! OOOORAH!"

At that point she ran the bandit scum over, clotheslining two of them with a double lariat and decking a third one with a boot to the face. Being crippled by magic left them wide open to her attacks, allowing her to forego defence and hit them as hard as she could. She then jumped on top of the booted one's face heels-first, using her enormous weight and powerful legs to smash the human's head open against the ground, killing him instantly.

"Ora! Ora! Ora ora ora oraoraoraoraoraora!"

Next came the immediate barrage of fists and kicks aimed at the few bandits who still had the courage to stand up to her. Some of them tried to strike at her unarmoured torso while others tried to stall for time by blocking and parrying. However, being ambushed themselves had made their actions sloppy and anxious. If they were calm, they would be able to quickly pick up on her simple attack pattern and either counter or avoid her blows. But the Mimic's new toy had taken a massive dump on their composure.

Judging by the eleven bandits it had silently disposed of just a while ago, Boxxy concluded they were tougher than the rabble it had dealt with until now. It estimated their Levels to be around 30 or 35 to 40 at most. But even if they were stronger than the other prey it had faced so far, hiding out among the tree branches and watching the caravan with a keen eye made them easy pickings. In the end, all their higher Levels did for them was raise the Mimic's Job and Skill Levels as it quietly picked them off one by one.

But it appeared that a few of the rats were making their escape. The Mass Panic Spell Crystal was a bit *too* effective and had made them abandon what loyalty they had in favour of running for their lives. The Mimic would therefore have to hunt them down and kill them. After all, the last time it let

someone escape like this, the result was a punitive force being organized to hunt it down. Needless to say, it wanted to avoid a repeat of that situation, as it might not escape with its life the next time around.

“Snack,” it called out telepathically.

“Yes, Master?”

Xera was currently scouting out the situation from high in the air without worry of being spotted. Even if someone were to look upwards it would be difficult to see her light blue body against the clear sky. Her eyesight might not have been as keen as a Ranger’s, but she had still spotted both the caravan and the bandits from her vantage point, well before the fight broke out. That was why Boxxy had been able to take advantage of the situation.

“I am going to hunt. Do not let any of the food survive.”

The succubus furrowed her brow as the gears in her rotten head were already hard at work. She was thinking about how to best accomplish such an order. A particularly devious idea then dawned on her when she saw how things were going on the ground.

“Master! I need something from you if I am to fulfil that order!”

Back at the battle itself, the adventurers were already locked in combat with the bandits. Their leader, Ranger Borona, had directed her comrades to assist the mysterious red-skinned demon. It was a risk to get too close to it, however. Even if that fiend was beating down on the bandits with lethal repercussions, it wasn’t clear if she was still under contract or not. Borona had taken the lack of ranged attacks coming out of the forest as a good sign though, as it implied the violent demoness had allies. She wasn’t clear on the details, but this was still her only chance. It was better to act now and catch the bandits in an improvised pincer attack rather than – as her second-in-command named Winchester put it – ‘sit down, have a pint and wait for this whole thing to blow over.’ Bloody dwarves and their alcoholism.

“Miles, support Eric and Logar,” she ordered through her Whisper Wind Skill.

The effects of this Ranger Skill made it so her words would reach any target within two hundred metres or so without fail.

“Haas, you have two of them on your left. Nora, don’t get near that rampaging demon just yet!”

The Skill also made it so only her target would be able to hear her speak, which made this an excellent tool for relaying instructions during a hectic battle like this.

“Winchester, how are you already out of MP! I swear, if you put whiskey in your mana potions again I will rip your liver out and feed it to you!”

She kept giving out orders while firing her bow from a distance. Even if the enemy was more numerous, the adventurers had magic support on their side, which made them the superior force. As the fight dragged on, her only worry became making sure no more people in her charge died to this scum.

Just then, she saw a Fireball fly out of the treeline. Her initial thought was that more bandits had shown up but quickly changed her mind when the magical projectile struck one of the bandits in the back. It enveloped him in flames, making him panic and roll around on the ground, screaming in agony. The Ranger quickly tracked the Spell’s trajectory back to its point of origin: a youthful woman who was emerging from the treeline. She had auburn hair tied in a long ponytail and wore long, grey robes common among magic users, although it was torn and bloodied on her right side at the arm and thigh. Deep gashes were visible on her exposed leg and shoulder, which she had cauterized with fire magic, but her heavy limp made it clear she was by no means okay.

“I am an adventurer from Monotal and that fiend’s master!” she yelled towards the Ranger. “Let us join forces!”

Said demon threw two thumbs up high above her head while her other pair of arms were crushing some poor soul’s head like an overripe melon.

“Understood! We welcome the assist!” came the immediate reply.

Borona was glad she and her companions wouldn’t have to face off against that fiend. Honestly speaking though, she still had some doubts whether that creature was actually leashed. She knew demons were brutal by nature and that bandits were to be killed on sight by law, so she could accept a certain amount of violence under the circumstances. However, ripping off a guy’s arms and beating him across the head with them while repeatedly yelling ‘Stop hitting yourself!’ was perhaps a bit *too* violent. It seemed her master

didn't even try to restrain the demon under their charge, which was not the sign of a promising Warlock

Her assertion had been right on the money, though. Kora's actual master was currently busy stalking one of the two deserters from earlier. It had neither the time, opportunity, nor desire to reign in its rampaging familiar. In fact, 'run wild and mow them down' were pretty much the only orders it had given Kora. Well, aside from making her cooperate with Snack's latest scheme, but it had already put those details out of its tiny mind to focus on what was immediately ahead.

A bandit panted heavily as he leaned against a tree, desperate to catch his breath. He was a young man, barely seventeen years of age. The Mass Panic from earlier had hit him hard since it was his first time experiencing that sort of depthless desperation. When he finally regained his senses, however, he had already deserted the battle. And he knew full well what that psycho called Makren did to deserters. So he just kept running. His reaction was understandable, though. Fighting people was one thing, but he never signed up for that freaky monster shit. He'd much rather turn himself in than –

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 250% more damage. Target HP -563.]
[You have slain your target in a single strike. Assassination Proficiency increased.]
[Proficiency level increased. Assassination is now Level 6. AGI +2. DEX +1. STR +1.]

The mithril dagger was then casually withdrawn from the back of the bandit's throat, pulling his body down in the process. Boxxy immediately activated its Cadaver Absorption, which should be the last time it needed to use it in order to advance the Skill to the next Level.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a minor success!]
[12% of the target's highest Attribute has been added to your own. AGI +10.]
[Proficiency level increased. Cadaver Absorption is now Level 5. All Attributes +1.]

And indeed it was. It even got some tasty Attributes from it as a bonus! Taking part in that little struggle had been the right choice. Even if its Jobs

weren't getting a lot of Experience Points (XP) due to the difference in Levels, it could at least train up some of the Skills it had been neglecting recently. Such as, for example, Stealth.

[Stealth]
The practice of thinning out one's presence in order to avoid detection.
Requirements: AGI 15, DEX 15, INT 5
Type: Toggled (ON)
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 10 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Suppresses all sounds made by movement.
Drains 2 MP for every 1 metre travelled in any direction.
The noise suppression effect of this Skill improves with each Level of this Skill.

Strictly speaking, Boxxy found this entire encounter to be rather nostalgic, as it had been almost an entire week since it was last able to pull off a string of lethal ambushes. That may not have been a long time in the grand scheme of things, but it felt like forever from the perspective of a monster barely three months old. Even the cataclysmic core meltdown earlier that day already felt like a distant memory to the Mimic.

Ah, but now wasn't the time to space out and reminisce about the past. It had hunted down one of the rats that tried to flee the sinking ship, but the other one had escaped in a different direction entirely. Boxxy wasn't very good at tracking so, realistically speaking, its chances of finding him now were catastrophically low. It could keep looking around blindly, but that would probably be just a waste of time and energy. Wouldn't it be better to go check on its familiars and the tasty buffet they were supposed to prepare for it? It had already been seven or eight minutes since it last saw Snack, and Boxxy hadn't heard from her since, so it felt it would be prudent to go check on her progress.

A stream of messages then flooded the Mimic's mind, interrupting its train of thought. It began with 'Your familiar has been banished,' signifying its pet succubus was no more. That was followed by a flood of notifications telling the monster it had either 'obliterated' or 'blown away' over a dozen

living things, dealing anywhere between 600 and 900 damage to each of them in the process. It even got reinvigorated for 144 HP and 128 MP as a result of its Butcher of Humanity Perk.

The truly tasty part, however, was the last group of messages it had received.

[Proficiency level increased. Power Overwhelming is now Level 4. INT +4.]
[Proficiency level increased. Crystallize Magic is now Level 3. INT +2. WIS +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Ruin Mastery is now Level 6. INT +2. WIS +1. END +1.]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 24 Warlock! INT +4. MNT +4. END +4.]

Boxxy was still taking in all the information when it heard the echoes of a thunderous explosion wash over the forest.

“Arms, any survivors?” it called out to its sole surviving familiar.

“I don’t think so, Master. That bitch blew up good! She took out the whole lot of them in – oh, wait! One of them’s still twitching!”

[Proficiency level increased. Summon Familiar is now Level 7. INT +2. WIS +1. MNT +1.]
[The slaughter invigorates you. HP +19. MP +18.]

“There, all done!”

“Good. Guard the place, I’ll be there later. I have prey to hunt.”

“Yes, Master.”

The Mimic felt oddly satisfied as it began its search for the last survivor. As expected of the Snack, it came up with a truly tasty plan. Boxxy would never have considered gaining the trust of adventurers just to explode them all at once in a suicide attack by detonating a Big Bang Ball. That was the nickname it had given to the potent combination of Power Overwhelming, Dark Explosion, and Crystallize Magic.

Incidentally, the Bang Ball was the same, only without the Power Overwhelming, and the Mass Panic Spell Crystals were referred to simply as Boo Balls. Granted, the containers conjured via Crystallized Magic weren't technically balls, but Boxxy had decreed them to be close enough. Besides, there was absolutely no way it could actually say something like 'dodecahedron,' no matter how many times Snack tried to teach it, so it would stick with 'balls' for the time being.

The Mimic was still somewhat confused about one aspect of the succubus's anti-adventurer plan, though. Surely there were better ways of hiding a Spell Crystal on one's person, right? Then again, Snack had carried out her task flawlessly, so it had no choice but to conclude that jamming the ten-centimetre wide object up the succubus's asshole had worked out for the best.

[General Information]
Boxxy T. Morningwood
Mimic (Greater), Genderless, 3 months old
Level 33.52 Mimic
Level 24.38 Warlock
953/968 HP (+2.2/sec)
314/900 MP (+1.1/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 113, DEX 124, AGI 113, END 171, INT 180, WIS 110, LCK 58, MNT 113, CHR 35

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 6.02
Storage - Lvl 4.53
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 5.00
Biomass - Lvl 3.46
Natural Armour - Lvl 2.23
[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar - Lvl 7.00
Power Overwhelming - Lvl 4.44
Demonology - Lvl 3.19

Crystallize Magic - Lvl 3.31
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 6.83
Stealth - Lvl 5.13
Sword Mastery - Lvl 6.39
Projectile Mastery - Lvl 2.44
Dagger Mastery - Lvl 4.53
Ruin Mastery - Lvl 6.31
Domination Mastery - Lvl 3.86

[Spell List]
Ruin - Shadowbolt, Ebonfire, Frostbite, Dark Explosion, Shadowbind
Domination - Mass Panic, Delirium, Dark Infusion, Mind Blast

Part Four

With one of the deserters taken care of and the caravan escorts turned to meat soup, Boxxy turned its attention towards finding the last survivor of that failed ambush. Or at least it would have liked to, but it had no idea where to even begin. It was confident it could outrun or at least keep up with humans at full speed, but that would require having a line of sight with its quarry. Such a thing was clearly not going to happen in this thick, overgrown forest. Even if the trees weren't there, the numerous ridges and boulders would still hinder its view. In fact, it had nearly lost track of its latest victim several times due to the terrain. The Mimic's AGI had risen quite a bit recently, but that young man appeared to have a good deal of the same Attribute himself. He probably also had some kind of movement assisting Skill, as he was faster than Boxy. He might have even escaped if this were even ground, or if he hadn't stopped to catch his breath. Thankfully he made a good deal of noise as he ran, allowing the monster to track him through the brush by sound. Unfortunately, such a method wasn't going to be of use when its next target was long gone.

Then how about following his trail?

Boxxy had already tracked a number of things during the few days spent in the forest, so it already knew what sort of signs to look out for: trampled grass, broken branches, torn clothing – that sort of thing. It was the same

knowledge it applied when it left an ‘invitation’ for those punitive force members to come find it. Admittedly that ambush hadn’t quite worked out as it would have liked since, much like the scuffle from earlier, the adventuring party’s scout had been on their toes. But the setup for it had been as good as could be expected.

The Mimic turned around with that in mind and headed back towards the last spot it saw the lone survivor, near the caravan ambush site. After several minutes it arrived at its destination – a place that was only about a dozen metres from the edge of the forest, beyond which was the road and the nearby canyon. Boxxy started investigating the area, using its magical perception to look for even the smallest sign of the man passing through but soon realised that was a pointless effort.

After all, the direction the soon-to-be-dead man was headed towards was obvious. There was a faint path of trampled and dried up grass on the forest floor that led away from the road and deeper into the woods. Humans had a fondness for travelling over such flattened and relatively smooth terrain, so there was a good chance the man ran through here. Boxxy just needed to follow this path and see where it led. But first, it decided to bring its familiar back to life. There was no point to delay it any longer, now that it was back on full MP.

“Greetings, Master.”

Xera materialized, grinning from ear to ear. Whether her good mood was because she had successfully fooled and betrayed an entire party of adventurers or due to the fact she experienced a fatal anal explosion was best left unsaid.

“Scout the path,” ordered Boxxy, pointing deeper towards the forest with one of its arachnid limbs.

“Understood, Master.”

The succubus spread her wings and took to the air but ended up reporting back the instant she cleared the forest’s canopy.

“Master, I see an old fort in the distance.”

“What’s a fort?”

“It’s … a stone building. Highly fortified and tricky to assault, but this one is in shambles. And before you ask – no, forts are not tasty.”

“Oh. So the meat ran away to this fort thingy?”

“I don’t know, Master, but it’s the most likely place that this path leads to. It’s actually not all that far away.”

The Mimic was more than a bit surprised. Wasn’t this too easy? It quickly skittered up the side of a tree to get a good look for itself. Its needle-like spider legs dug into the bark as it ascended the tree trunk and climbed atop the thickest, tallest branch it could find. But even after going as high up as it could, it still couldn’t see above the treeline. This would probably be the first situation where it wanted to be taller. Well, not like that was impossible.

The ghostly pale pseudo-Xera’s head poked out from the mass of leaves, giving Boxxy a vantage point similar to that of the already cringing demoness. The albino head swayed and shook awkwardly thanks to the metre-long neck it was attached to, massively creeping out the original in the process. She wasn’t a stranger to this sort of freakish display, but seeing her own body being stretched like that really got to her.

Though whether she was shaking because of disgust or excitement was something she wasn’t quite ready to answer.

The Mimic scanned the treeline and immediately saw what Snack was talking about. There was an overgrown tower poking through the treetops, with stone walls reminiscent of those around the (former) city of Monotal surrounding it. Peering into the distance, it also saw what looked like people patrolling on top of them. They were smaller than grains of rice from its point of view, but the two-legged, two-armed shapes were most definitely moving about.

Humans liked hiding behind walls, so there was indeed a very good chance its quarry had run there. However, much like the city, there appeared to be quite a few sentries up on those crumbling walls. They were bound to discover it and raise an alarm, at which point it might get pincushioned by ranged attacks. Then again, it had a pretty tasty Snack-shaped distraction with which to befuddle them.

Both of its demonic familiars had gotten stronger with its latest burst of Job and Skill Levels. Xera's magic-focused Status in particular shined through as she surpassed 1,000 MP. The much higher INT would, without a doubt, make her Spells much more dangerous than Boxxy's. While both monsters dealt a similar amount of damage with their respective magic, Snack could keep using her highly efficient fire-based Spells for much, much longer. The downside was that her physical Attributes were atrocious. A Level 17 Succubus and Level 12 Pyromancer with a maximum HP of 517 was pathetic from the Mimic's point of view.

There was more to a Status than simply Attributes though. The increase in Levels of Xera's Jobs had also given her access to two brand new Skills she did not have until several minutes ago.

[Invisibility]
Succubi are tricksters of the highest order, capable of fooling even light itself.
Requirements: Level 15 Succubus
Type: Active
Activation Time: 2 seconds
Cost: 250 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Grants invisibility for 30 seconds.
Increases the duration of this Skill by 6 seconds per Level of this Skill.
Casting a Spell or taking damage will negate the effect.

The first was similar, yet completely different from Stealth. It confused the eyes but did not mask the noise she made, so she could still be detected by the sound of her footsteps or breathing. Her gliding around, however, was almost completely silent. Flying while under the effects of this Skill was perfect for scouting out enemy positions and getting the drop on others. The downside was that she had to stand perfectly still while activating it, which meant using this once combat started was ill-advised.

[Mana Burn]
A Pyromancer's flames can burn away magic itself.
Requirements: Level 10 Pyromancer, Devouring Flame, INT 45, WIS 45
Type: Passive

Range: 100 metres
[Effects]
Devouring Flame effect will reduce the target's MP by an amount equal to 50% of HP damage dealt.
Increases the duration of Devouring Flame by 0.5 seconds per Level of this Skill.

This second one was perhaps not as impactful but seemed to be quite tasty nonetheless. Those Devouring Flames left behind by Snack's magic were almost as bad as the Spell itself, but combined with this Skill it would make them even worse. The ability to reduce the target's MP directly was undoubtedly going to be very useful in long fights, especially against opponents that could heal their wounds. It was unclear to Boxxy if it would have helped against the Fleshmaiden, but adventurers with healing magic were incredibly persistent if one was unable to take them out instantly. Another effective target would be people or monsters like Arms that had tiny MP pools compared to their absurd HP, as it would render then unable to use whatever Skills or Spells they had.

But the Mimic was digressing. It still had people to slaughter, so it switched mental tracks from theorizing about the best way to murder things to putting said theories into practice.

"Snack, we're attacking that place."

It leapt off the tree and started making its way towards the ruined fort. Even if it could be seen from the treetops, it still took about twenty more minutes to reach the place. The sky steadily turned red and the sun was about to set by the time Boxxy reached its destination. It wasn't bothered by the passage of time, though, as darkness was its ally. And the trip had given it time to prepare. Its Spell Crystals would last up to eighteen minutes now, which meant it could stockpile quite a few of them in advance. It took only a little over two minutes to recover the MP spent on a Bang Ball, so it could easily start the battle with five of them at the ready while still being on full MP.

However, throwing them out in the middle of combat was going to be tricky, what with all the awkward flailing involved. That was why it gave four of them to the succubus, though it refused her request to stuff them up her ass. Even if she was adamant they would fit, that wasn't the point. She had to throw them down from above as a surprise attack and Boxxy had

serious doubts she would be able to evacuate her bowels quick enough to accomplish that. After all, once the keyword was spoken, all four of them would arm at the same time. And then there was the obvious lack of accuracy to consider with such a method. Therefore, she would just carry them around in her arms.

“Now stop saying stupid things and go!”

Xera’s idiotic monster of a master had called her ‘butt-bombing’ idea stupid. A brainless chest that bit people in the face as a way of saying ‘hello’ was looking down on her. And worst of all, it was completely in the right. A casual observer would expect a proud demon such as a succubus to feel scorned or disheartened at such a realisation, and they would be correct. In fact, if she were the same demoness as yesterday, she might actually suffer HP damage from that self-inflicted burn.

“Right away, Master.”

However, that Xera was gone. All that was left in her place was a shameless, hopeless, incorrigible pervert who was sorely disappointed she wasn’t going to get her anal cavity stretched and abused. Still, the succubus had orders to follow and the sooner she was done, the sooner she could resume choking on her co-contractor’s meat stick for fun. She promptly activated her newly acquired Invisibility and took off from the ground into the air. She glided silently through the evening sky towards the bandit-infested fort some fifty metres away and began relaying the layout of the place back to Boxxy through the mind link.

She had somewhat expected it at first, but the succubus calling that place a fort was an overstatement. In actuality, it was closer to ‘decrepit ruin’ if one were to be brutally honest. The main feature of the place was the fifteen-metres-tall half-collapsed stone tower. On the ground next to it stood an old two-story barracks made out of rotten wood. Opposing it stood a smaller stone building that doubled as both storehouse and armoury. Several shabby lodgings such as wooden shacks and primitive tents from animal hides and tree branches were strewn around the place. Those highly temporary lodgings had likely been erected in a hurry by the criminal gang that had turned the old military outpost into their base of operations.

A collapsing wall about six metres tall and two metres thick surrounded the ancient compound. From the air, it looked like a lopsided rectangle with about thirty metres on each side and a small, circular turret on each corner. While not large enough to be a castle wall capable of repelling invaders, it was more than enough to ward off wild animals and monsters. About half of it had collapsed under the ravages of time and what remained looked as if it would fall over with a good push, although the same could be said of the other buildings.

“I also see six lookouts on the wall, but I expect more to be inside,” said Xera, finishing off her report.

“Good, then drop the Bang Balls to start the attack,” came the telepathic order.

And it was obeyed, though reluctantly. The succubus armed the four crystals she was carrying and dropped them from above at random. One of them fell next to a bow-armed bandit on top of the wall, the resulting shockwave knocking him off his perch and down onto the ground. It also caused the aged wall to heave mightily under the stress and collapse into a pile of stones. The second magical bomb fell on the barracks, ripping a huge hole in its roof and wall. The last two didn’t hit anything of value and simply made small craters in the ground, kicking up a lot of dust and bother in the process.

“The wall exploded!”

“What the flying fuck was that!”

Overall, the damage done was quite minimal. However, the collapsing wall, the screaming victim, and the exploded barracks all did their job of terrifying the simple bandits. Their reaction was to be expected, though. Just knowing magic existed didn’t mean you were mentally prepared to be attacked by it, especially not when it happened almost literally out of the blue. Thankfully for them, there was someone around to take charge of the situation.

“Calm down. you worms!”

A two-metre-tall scar-faced and red-haired man named Renmak came out of the ruined tower. He had just finished ‘interrogating’ the spineless worm who’d abandoned his twin brother, Makren. The idiot actually came back to

their base rather than run off and die in the forest somewhere. Judging from his testimony about the ‘four-armed red nightmare’ and how he had soiled *both* sides of his pants while running away, it was clear to the former adventurer exactly who was attacking them.

“It’s an enemy attack! It’s likely a Warlock!” he shouted. “Don’t bunch up! Scatter and find hi–”

A mass of darkness hit him squarely in the back before he could even finish giving out orders, making him scream in pain as he fell forward.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 300% more damage. Target HP -605.]

[You have dealt a devastating blow. Target stunned for 5 seconds.]

The other bandits looking in his direction were left speechless at the sudden turn of events. First their base started exploding for no good reason, and now one of those incredibly tough and fearsome twins was face-down on the ground with a hole in his upper back. It was as if some wild beast had snuck up on Renmak and taken a bite out of him.

That wild guess wasn’t quite right, but it wasn’t entirely wrong either.

Krakakooom

The sound of roaring rained down on them from above. Looking up, they saw the bizarre combination of a box, a spider and a slut wrapped in a cloak of lightning, clinging to the side of the ruined tower.

“Shadowbolt ~♪!”

No longer needing to hide itself, Boxxy fired the empowered Spell at the collapsed bandit. It hit him in the waist, splitting him in two and finishing him off while leaving his heart and head intact. The Mimic then looked towards the other bandits, who felt dread wash over them when they saw its white lips curve into an impossibly wide smile in the shape of a crescent moon. And a few minutes later, the only thing left of those men was their mostly intact but significantly mutilated corpses. The combined magical barrage from Boxxy and Xera swept them away in a completely one-sided show of force. Bandits generally had few magic users on hand, and their

leader had taken them all out to that ambush, along with the most capable fighters. The ones left behind were runts – good only for chasing monsters away or doing menial labour – so they never had a chance.

Now that all of those pesky humans were out of the way, Boxxy was free to investigate their camp at its leisure. This was only its second time being in the same living space as humans, so it was quite curious as to what it would find. There wasn't much to see, though. As expected of a bunch of outlaws inhabiting the woods, their living conditions were rather poor. Just being able to drink and eat on a regular basis and keep a roof over their heads was good enough for most of them.

So it was understandable that the rickety huts and tents the lower-ranked members used held nothing of value. The wrecked barracks building that had been used as a combination common room and mess hall didn't fare much better, either. Boxxy found a bunch of food which was immediately eaten and a few barrels of clean water that were completely ignored, but that was it.

The smaller stone building proved to be much more fruitful, yielding a pile of weapons, armours and other miscellaneous items that caught the Mimic's interest. These items must've belonged to the victims of these criminals, seeing as how they were bloodied, rusty, bent, broken, ripped, or in otherwise poor condition. They reminded Boxxy of that pile of scrap metal it left behind in the dungeon during its harrowing escape. Well, that particular collection of souvenirs was probably evaporated in the blast and none were even remotely shiny, so it didn't think about them too much.

Still, there was something to be found in this scrap heap. Boxxy looted a few swords that looked to be in mostly working order. There was also a set of ten basic – albeit identical – iron daggers that were also put away inside its Storage, mostly to be used as throwing knives should the need arise. It then went back outside and started using Cadaver Absorption on the corpses, out of which it only got two favourable outcomes.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a minor success!]
[The body's deteriorated condition has weakened this effect by 25%.]
[12% of the target's highest Attribute has been added to your own. END +7.]

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a minor success!]
[12% of the target's highest Attribute has been added to your own. STR +13.]

The vast majority were failures as expected. At the very least, this success rate was definitely higher than what it experienced while fighting in the forest. Both its LCK and its Cadaver Absorption Level had gone up significantly since its last real 'harvest,' so this much was natural. It still needed about 10% more Proficiency for Shapeshift to advance, though. Boxxy felt like it had just been repeating the same old transformations over and over, which didn't really seem to afford it much progress towards the next Level. Even turning into a humanoid shape other than Xera's did little for its Proficiency. Therefore, it would need to actively consider what new shapes and forms it could adapt as part of its continued training.

But that would come later. Right now, it still had one more building to check: the ruined tower that the biggest of the humans came out of. It walked into the building through a stone archway and looked around. There was a table with a bunch of papers and books in one corner and a number of chairs thrown haphazardly around it. Several unlit torches lined the walls and the starry night sky was visible through the missing parts of the wall and ceiling. There really wasn't much to look at in this filthy place, yet Boxxy's attention was focused on one single thing.

The Mimic let out a loud, aggressive hiss as it took a few wary steps backwards and bared its teeth. In this place, against all odds, it was left face to face with *that* once more. The second toughest opponent it had ever run across. The Fleshmaiden was undoubtedly the worst, but that thing in front of the sentient chest had given it more trouble than everything else besides her. Even that janther was ultimately no big deal in comparison.

"What's the matter, Master?" asked Xera. She had followed her master into the room and was more than a little surprised to see it acting cautiously for no apparent reason.

"Enemy! It's an enemy!" it spat back.

The succubus, however, still had no idea what Boxxy was talking about.

All she saw was the base of an old, stone tower with nothing in it except for some shitty wooden furniture and what looked to be stairs leading down

into some sort of basement, sealed off by an enchanted steel grate.

Part Five

“Dark Explosion!”

Ka-ponnn

The hateful steel grate was rocked by the most violent of Boxxy’s Spells. The metal creaked and groaned, but it survived with barely a dent. The stone brick doorway it was bolted to was equally unfazed.

“Dark Explosion!”

It tried again, but it didn’t fare any better. It didn’t seem like the grate was withstanding the force of those shockwaves, but more like the magic itself wasn’t exerting as much power as it normally would. That was because military fortifications such as this would have some sort of enchantment that would repel magical attacks. It was only common sense. Otherwise any moron with a bunch of Levels could topple a castle. The only reason Boxxy’s Spells worked on the walls outside was that the enchantments had all waned and lost their hold over the years. However, the magic built into the central part of the old fort had not succumbed to the ravages of time just yet, which was the only reason this tower was even standing in the first place.

Not that the Mimic had any idea about any of this. From its perspective, it just wasn’t hitting things hard enough.

Krakakoom

“Huh?” exclaimed Xera.

She was still a bit stupefied when she realised the big bad ‘enemy’ her master was so wary of was an inanimate object. The angry face and hate-filled shouting her albino imitation made were also a first. So she was slow to react when said master flared up with the really dangerous Power Overwhelming.

“Master! If you –”

“Dark Explosion!!”

KADOOOOONNN

Aimed right at the middle of that infuriating grate, the extra-strength Dark Explosion finally did the trick. It overwhelmed the anti-magic enchantment on the steel and the surrounding stone, blowing them apart. The nearby wall of the tower itself also got caught up in the Spell, setting off a chain reaction that collapsed the entire thing on top of Boxxy and Xera and burying them in debris.

A few minutes later, the animate chest crawled out from under the rubble. The pseudo-Xera sticking out of it had been pierced clean through the chest by one metal rod, and a second, smaller one was stuck in the Mimic's main body. The extra-powerful Spell had turned the metal rods the grating was assembled with into spear-sized shrapnel.

"Piss!" it cursed, using Xera's borrowed mouth. "That stupid grate, how dare it try to kill me again!"

"Master, that was entirely your own fault," came a voice from nearby.

The real succubus was currently digging herself out of the rubble. Apparently the metal shrapnel had missed her entirely, and the falling stones weren't enough to finish her off.

"No, it wasn't," insisted Boxxy. "That thing is just really dangerous."

It refused to admit that it had inadvertently hurt itself again, despite copious amounts of evidence to the contrary. Especially since it should have known what would happen if it went for the Big Bang in an enclosed space. So what if that little fact slipped its still developing mind in the heat of the moment? The inanimate object was surely to blame, not itself.

Xera let out a disappointed, almost defeated sigh.

"Haaaah … Whatever you say, Master."

The cluelessness of this monster that annihilated an entire city for kicks calling a lump of metal 'dangerous' was too much for her to handle. She decided to avoid pressing the issue and change the subject entirely.

"So what happens now?" she asked in a dull monotone.

"…"

Boxxy took a few moments to calm down a bit. That was a good question, wasn't it? Why did they come in here to begin with?

Oh right – checking out the place. The Mimic pulled the metal rods from its body and went back to its more compact spider-chest form. It went over to double-check on the passageway it blew apart, but it was inaccessible. The narrow, steep staircase entrance was covered with rubble, as was the path beyond it. Clearing the way would take substantial effort, not to mention the basement it led to might have collapsed anyway. The Mimic's little magically-empowered tantrum had put the nail in the coffin for this old ruin.

Well, technically it was possible to use Storage to excavate the place and explore what was downstairs, but Boxxy had more pressing matters to attend to.

"We go back to where Arms is."

Like those twenty-plus corpses waiting for it back at the massacred caravan. It had gotten a lucky streak of successes with its Cadaver Absorption recently and wanted to see if that would continue.

And so Boxxy and Xera left the former fort and current pile of rubble behind and made their way back to Kora. The sky had already gone dark and the stars peered down from between gaps in the forest's canopy. While this forest was never particularly hospitable during the day, it was much worse during the night. Most nocturnal monsters were far more vicious than their daylight-loving counterparts. The janther was a prime example of that, and this area was home to one of those self-proclaimed kings ... an individual who was currently investigating the scent of a challenger that had entered his domain.

At least that was what it seemed like at first. The simple beast was more than a little confused when it found out this 'challenger' was a box with legs, rather than one of its own kind. It observed this curious creature from a distance, not sure what to do with it. That wooden shell and stringy-looking legs didn't seem particularly appetizing. On the other hand, this thing carried the faint scent of another male's urine and was brazenly walking around its territory, which was an insult – one this janther would

not forgive. So it gave up on stalking its target from a distance and crept closer, using its Stealth Skill to make sure it wasn't discovered.

And it worked perfectly until it got to about ten metres away. That was when the hunter felt an odd tingling in its whiskers.

"Ebonfire ~♪!"

Followed immediately by an intense burning sensation that covered its entire being.

"Fireball!"

Then came a second, even more intense, pain spreading across its face. The beast roared and charged forward in a blind rage, but it was no match for the Mimic. Boxxy may have had the disadvantage when it came to base parameters, but its Attributes were significantly higher. And it could use magic. The janther was therefore slain with little to no effort by the monster with a combined Level of 57.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a level 25 Warlock! INT +2. MNT +2. END +2.]
[You have learned a new Spell: Singularity.]

Correction, fifty-*eight*.

"Status," chanted Boxxy, eager to see what changes had occurred.

[General Information]
Boxxy T. Morningwood
Mimic (Greater), Genderless, 3 months old
Level 33.52 Mimic
Level 25.00 Warlock (MAX)
1026/1026 HP (+2.3/sec)
543/910 MP (+1.1/sec)

The Warlock Job reaching its 'MAX' Level at 25 wasn't that big of a surprise. Those seemed to go up in multiples of 25. However, the lack of a (+) sign anywhere on this Status screen was most unsettling. Boxxy tried to ask its font of knowledge about this, but Snack wasn't particularly helpful.

Her Status worked in a completely different way, after all, so she never cared about the Job progression of mortals.

Still, someone with her wealth of life experience inevitably picked up on certain things whether they wanted to or not, like the whole Rank Up process. One of her old masters obsessed over it constantly, so it was natural she would learn a thing or two about it. Just how she knew that one way to advance the Warlock Job was to visit a trainer who worked for one of the guilds. That wasn't very helpful to Boxxy, though, as those places would never accept a monster's custom.

There was some good news, at least. The succubus remembered something about an alternate way of advancing to the next tier of one's Job but couldn't offer any details. She never gave a damn about such trivialities, so it was hardly surprising some things went in one ear and out the other. Boxxy would need to extract information about developing its Warlock Job from a library or guild by using its Snack as a proxy pair of eyes.

Bottom line was that it wasn't going to be getting any new Skills for the moment, but at least it got a brand new Spell for its troubles, right?

[Singularity]
Requirements: Level 25 Warlock, INT 200, MNT 100
School: Ruin
Type: Area Effect
Cost: 500 MP
Range: 40 metres
[Effects]
Creates a gravity well at the target location for 15 seconds.
Requires a focusing crystal.

Okay, maybe not. It was still short of the 200 INT requirement, but that could be solved with a few more Levels. The real problem was that 'focusing crystal.' Yet another thing Boxxy didn't know about. Inspecting the words didn't offer any new insight, either. The knowledge of the Spell seemed to indicate it was an apple-sized bauble and that it would be consumed to invoke the Spell, but that was it. More useful data like what it was made of, where to get it, or what it actually looked like was not available. And, most important of all, the Mimic had no idea if a focusing

crystal was tasty or not. It didn't sound very tasty, but it would probably be shiny at the very least.

"Oh, Master! You're back!" said Kora when she saw the two of them step out of the treeline. "Thank fuck! I was getting so bored that I –"

"I don't care. Did you finish retrieving the bodies?" asked Boxxy, shoving aside her complaints.

" … Yeah, they're over there in a pile."

The fiend pointed behind her towards a deep crater in the cobblestone road, the site of Xera's butt-bombing. All the dead bandits were there, as well as what was left of the adventurers. The mutilated corpses and miscellaneous body parts were piled up in a way that resembled a disgusting salad. Which, considering the circumstances, was oddly fitting. The Mimic went to the corpse pile and started processing them using Cadaver Absorption.

"Urk!" exclaimed Kora. "Is it … *drinking* those people?"

"Oh yeah," said Xera. "This is your first time seeing that, isn't it?"

"What the fuck! It does this regularly? Why!"

"It's some weird Skill the Master uses to permanently upgrade its Status. I'm not sure on the details, but I think that's how it got the Warlock Job without visiting a trainer. Seems to be quite convenient."

"That's an understatement! Considering the body count that thing has racked up in just a day, I'd say it's almost *too* convenient!"

The succubus shrugged. "Maybe. It's not a bad thing, though. Honestly, I don't mind having that box as a Master. It may be a moron, but it's certainly more entertaining than my previous contractors."

"Hmm ... You do have a point. I mean, it's only been my first day, yet I got to smash, like, a hundred different things! Certainly way better than my previous jobs. Though to be honest, this is only my third time being bound to a mortal, so I don't know if that statement counts for much."

"What? Really?" Xera blurted, eyes wide. "Only three contracts? Aren't you like three hundred years old?"

On average, a demon got contracted to a new master once every fifty or sixty years, so cases like Kora's were quite rare.

“Well, my first master was okay, I guess,” explained the fiend. “It was some crime boss or something who had me act as her bodyguard. I mostly threw mean looks at people, but I saw a fair bit of action.”

“That doesn’t seem too bad.”

“Yeah, it was alright. A lot more fun than being used as some ‘champion of justice’ or whatever. My second contractor sucked donkey ass though. It was some damnable dwarf that kept me bound in his service for almost a century. The asshole only summoned me three times! Three! And the worst part is they were all to help him move furniture around!”

Xera grimaced. “Wow, that sounds terrible. No wonder you jumped on this thing’s fiend contract so eagerly!”

“If anyone here’s the eager one, it’s you, isn’t it!”

The two demons kept making small talk for a while before it inevitably descended into their favourite pastime: hate-fucking. It really was no surprise that the two of them seemed unable to keep their hands off each other – almost as if they were newlyweds on a honeymoon. After all, the pleasures of the flesh were impossible to experience in a place like the Beyond, so they indulged themselves at every opportunity in the physical realm.

Boxxy ignored the flesh-on-flesh slapping noises coming from behind and continued processing the corpses. It had absorbed thirteen mostly intact bodies, seven that had a few missing parts and three that were basically a head and torso with extras. It appeared that the Mimic’s earlier lucky streak had run out, however, as none of them yielded a success. There were also a bunch of leftover bits that weren’t usable, so it just devoured them to fill its belly. It did, however, regret waiting so long to do so, as humans were at their tastiest while they were still warm.

Having concluded its desecration of the dead, Boxxy climbed out of the crater and went to investigate the two cargo wagons and the overturned stagecoach.

At first, the food cart seemed to be a really good catch, but that judgement quickly changed after the Mimic sampled its contents. The preserved food it carried would definitely satisfy the monster’s hunger, but Boxxy would be hard-pressed to call it tasty. The fruits and vegetables in particular had little

to no flavour, while the salted fish was downright nasty. The various dried meats and jerky were all right, though. After tasting a bit of the merchandise, Boxxy began putting all of it, except for the fish, into its Storage. Food was food, even if it wasn't particularly tasty. Having another source of nutrition would allow Boxxy to absorb more corpses rather than be forced into eating them to sustain itself.

The fish could just fuck off and disappear though. They were almost as untasty as the mummified remains left behind by Cadaver Absorption, so it didn't even bother with them.

[Proficiency level increased. Storage is now Level 5. END +1. INT +1. WIS +2.]

This was the first time in a long while Boxxy had used the Storage Skill so much, so gaining a Level of it wasn't that big of a surprise. In fact, Boxxy was counting on it. The higher the Skill Level, the higher the pocket dimension's capacity. At Level 4 it would have been impossible to fit in all the cargo it wanted to carry around, but Level 5 gave it more space. It was filled almost to bursting anyway but still had a few cubic metres' worth of room inside it as it moved on to the second wagon.

This one held a plethora of common items one would find in a general store and was slightly more exciting, at least at first. After all, the Mimic had never seen the vast majority of things in here, like kitchen utensils, wooden plates, commoner clothes, string, hammers, nails, paints, farming tools, and so on. However, simple curiosity was all the attention they got. Once they were judged as neither shiny nor tasty, they became unworthy of the Mimic's notice. It still took a bag of glass marbles and a mining pick though; the former were somewhat shiny and looked like they would be fun to play around with, and the latter seemed like it was good at breaking things. Certainly better than slamming its swords or daggers into hard surfaces.

Satisfied, Boxxy left the cargo wagons behind and approached the ruined stagecoach. It seemed Arms had been slacking when it gave her the order to gather all the corpses in one spot. Then again, it only told her to gather the 'redheads and adventurers.' It failed to realise there would be people in the wrecked pile of wood at the very front until it was standing right next to it and saw a bloodied hand sticking out from under the mass of planks. It tore

through the wreckage, pulling it apart and flinging the debris haphazardly around using its tentacles. To its surprise, it actually found not one but three corpses inside.

The first was an adult male human. One of the bandits' Spells had hit him on the side of the head, destroying half of it. He was eaten to become part of the Mimic's Biomass. Oh right – Biomass only increased in proficiency if Boxxy consumed flesh. Focusing too much on Cadaver Absorption would have a negative impact on this Skill's development, and the Mimic couldn't have that. If it wasn't for the additional HP recovery it granted, the monster would have surely died in its encounter with the Fleshmaiden. Regrowing all those lost body parts would also be impossible without the deep reserves of raw shapeshifting material this Skill allowed it to store up.

The monster now regretted not chowing down on that janther it killed. Consuming hundreds of kilograms worth of meat and guts like that would have surely helped push Biomass closer to Level 4. Using Cadaver Absorption on it felt like a waste, in retrospect. Perhaps, in the future, it would be better to devour large and relatively weak creatures like that. Smaller ones could be absorbed in order to raise its Cadaver Absorption proficiency, since the size of the body didn't seem to actually matter when it came to that particular Skill, unlike Biomass.

Speaking of which, the second and third corpses in that wrecked caravan were quite small ... puny even. They were both gnomes – a race of people said to share some distant ancestry with dwarves. Their average height was only about a hundred and twenty centimetres. They could almost pass for human children, were it not for their well-trimmed facial hair and slightly 'off' proportions. Their heads, for instance, seemed too large for their bodies, while their arms were so long that they could probably touch their knees without bending over.

For Boxxy, this was the first time it had encountered this race. Based on their anatomical oddities, it was immediately able to recognize they were not human, so it was slightly curious how they would taste. It wrapped its tongue around one's waist and gobbled it up like a piece of candy. These things were so small, the Mimic could probably fit two or three of them inside its mouth cavity at once.

As for the taste, it was nothing overwhelming. They had a flavour very similar to that of humans, much like the elves and dwarves it had already sampled multiple times. They were still tasty, but humans were definitely the best. The monster didn't eat the second one though, as these scrawny morsels would do little to satisfy its hunger. The only reason it ate the first one was to get a feel for their taste, so Boxxy just absorbed the second. This resulted in another failure, but the Mimic wasn't all that bothered by such outcomes. It wasn't like it lost anything other than MP when it ran that sort of gamble, so there was no point in feeling disappointed.

It was just about to move on from this place and continue its aimless journey down the road when it stopped to consider part of the wrecked stagecoach. There was a miraculously intact wheel hanging on a less-than-intact axle. Boxxy's violent digging through the wreckage had disturbed it, causing it to spin around ever so slowly as it hung off the piece of wood.

When Snack mentioned the wagons while she was scouting ahead earlier, she had described them as 'huge boxes humans use to move stuff around.' The Mimic had never actually seen it in motion, so it just assumed those horses were just dragging it along the ground. After all, the carriage's round 'legs' were clearly lacking feet, knees, or any other discernible joints. Because they weren't legs at all, they were wheels. They spun around instead of moving up and down, allowing the carriage to roll across the relatively flat ground.

And it was this seemingly inconsequential piece of common knowledge that captivated Boxxy. It more or less understood that rolling around was a more efficient form of movement than walking, especially on flat surfaces. That was knowledge it had gleaned during its brief time handling the gigantic dungeon core. True, it was heavy and looked like it was tricky to control at high speed, but it still moved much faster than if Arms were to carry it around on her back.

Curious as to how good these wagons would be at that sort of thing, it took a run up and slammed at full force into the side of the mostly empty food wagon. The vehicle rocked violently but didn't budge. The Mimic let out a disappointed sigh as its enthusiasm deflated. It then realised that those 'round feet' would only roll in a particular direction. An understandable

mistake, all things considered. So the monster repositioned itself and tried again, this time from the back if the carriage.

SLAM

Kotororor

It moved! How mysterious! Boxxy repeated the process a few more times, using its magical perception to observe the wheels and axles as it slowly inched the vehicle forward. As for the purpose of this entire exercise, it was to fulfil an unerring law of this world:

Mimics gotta mimic.

If a giant box could have wheels and axles, then why couldn't a smaller one? That was the thought that drove the monster to move the carriage around and observe its means of motion. After about ten minutes of studying it, the Mimic decided it had seen enough, stopped playing around with the wagon and sat down on the ground. Half of its spider legs retracted completely inside its body, while the remaining four became short, thick, and straight.

Now came the moment of truth: The Mimic had to form the actual wheels. It did this by pumping its Biomass reserves into those stumpy legs. Eight long, fleshy rods grew out from each of those, growing outwards until they were just under sixty centimetres in length. The tips of these organic sticks split in two up to around the halfway point, then stretched outwards to form a bent T shape. The split up tips then met each other to form one long, flawless circle.

[Proficiency level increased. Shapeshift is now Level 7. AGI +1. DEX +1. END +2.]

It took the Mimic about two minutes to create four spoked, faux-wood wheels, each with a radius of just over thirty centimetres. What looked like wood was actually condensed and hardened tissue that became a sort of cartilage – an organic, rubbery substance that was good at absorbing vibrations and withstanding impacts. The wheels were positioned in such a way that the chest would have to travel sideways like a miniature wagon filled with teeth and murderous intent.

Boxxy hesitantly started moving its newly forged ‘feet’ around. The shape was a bit inconvenient but couldn’t be helped. After all, the wagon it copied them from was longer than it was wider, so the Mimic would have to assume a similar construction, at least at first. It was confident that, with some trial and error, it would find the right setup to ensure maximum stability. Much like when it created its favourite spider legs for the first time.

However, such an adjustment period turned out to be unnecessary. After all, a carriage was chest-shaped, but a spider was not. By copying the work of skilled craftsmen, Boxxy actually found very little adjustments that needed to be made. If anything, its imitation product turned out to far surpass the original. After all, the four wheels stuck to the side of the creature were living things that could be bent and angled in any direction at will.

Feeling proud of itself, Boxxy then decided to move around. It flexed the muscles at the base of its axle-legs, forcing the wheels to rotate under their own power. That was when it discovered the first major flaw with its brilliant transformation: power management. The overeager box put too much power into the motion, causing a sudden burst of acceleration that launched it sideways faster than expected. It travelled several metres in an instant, which then showed the second flaw with its new ‘invention.’

[Your muscles have ripped. HP -87.]
[You have been dismembered. HP -154.]

The very muscles used to power the rotational momentum gave out. Although they were flexible and malleable, they had a limit as to how many times they could twist around an axle before tearing. With the tissue holding them in place severed, the freshly grown quartet of wheels and axles detached from the base of the Mimic. They rolled off into the distance or flew up into the air, spraying yellow blood all over the place. Their owner, currently busy hissing and cursing at the sudden pain, slammed into the ground and skidded across it for a little bit, scratching up its sensitive underside.

“What the fuck is it doing?” asked Kora, with a perplexed look on her face.

“Hyehn, heeeeh, aaauuu…” moaned Xera with her tongue sticking out and her eyes rolled up into her head.

“Right, good point.”

The fiend then gave up on worrying about the silly box and resumed pounding the face-down-ass-up succubus’s tight asshole with renewed vigour.

Part Six

Having recovered from its pathetic crash, Boxxy was forced to re-examine its approach. Creating a detached joint that would allow the wheels to spin as much as they wanted was possible, but it also came with a good amount of risk. Doing that would make it much easier for them to come loose and break off should the monster go over rough terrain. Ah, but the Mimic could just revert them back into legs if it wanted to go off-road. However, the earlier incident did manage to prove one thing: Moving around on wheels was far easier than walking.

So the animate chest decided to give this new mode of transportation another go without feeling disheartened. This was hardly the first time it failed at shapeshifting, anyway. It messed up multiple times back when it was still learning how to use those spider legs or how eyes worked, so trial and error was hardly a foreign concept to it. Well, forming these wheels took quite a lot longer than those arachnid limbs, but that was a temporary setback. Muscle memory was a terrifying thing that meant even complex creations like Xera’s upper body could be thrown together in an instant with enough practice.

First of all, however, it needed to deal with the Biomass it lost when those prototype wheels flew off into the distance. It was not an insignificant amount. At least rectifying that turned out to be as simple as opening its Storage and depositing roughly five kilograms of strawberry jam directly into its gullet. It was pretty flavourless to the monster, no different from eating leaves, wood, or spinal fluid, but it would still do the job of replenishing its lost body mass after being digested.

Once that was done, it once again grew out those circular limbs in mostly the same fashion, but with one key difference. This time it created the flexible joint at the spot where the wheel and the axle connected, rather than where the limb poked out of its body. That was when it ran into its first

major hurdle. It would need to completely detach the wheels from the axles, but doing so would effectively cut them off from its own body. This was not a particularly attractive proposition, as the wheel-shaped body mass would devolve into meat paste once separated from the main body.

What about continuously shapeshifting the connecting tissue so that it would untwist, thus preventing it from snapping? That seemed like it might work, so the Mimic gave it a try. It willed its new limbs to rotate, taking extra care to use as little strength as possible. The box-cart inched forward at a snail's pace. After the wheels made three revolutions each, it felt the strain on the connecting tissue and willed it to untwist itself without detaching, then kept moving forward. Doing so allowed it to keep going, covering a distance of several metres before it safely came to a stop.

Well, that method worked, but the concentration required to carry out the constant, minute shapeshifting was pretty taxing. Moving in such a manner would be more tiring and slower than simply walking. Plus, allowing momentum to carry it downhill would undoubtedly cause the wheels to spin too fast and tear the connecting tissue anyway. And mere practice would be unable to make it speed up to a point where this wasn't an issue. Unlike the 'fire and forget' actions of growing limbs and then using them, this was an ongoing process that required constant attention and muscle flexing.

In short, this method of moving around defeated the purpose of having wheels in the first place. Simple walking along and tumbling down a hill would prove to be much easier than –

"Aha!"

Boxxy got an idea. Rather than trying to mimic the entire cart, didn't it only need to focus on the wheels themselves? After all, that dungeon core rolled around just fine even though it was one solid object with no moving parts. Surely something similar was entirely within the Mimic's reach.

The four fleshy discs and their axles were quickly reabsorbed back into its main body, leaving it to sit on the ground. Next it grew two slightly larger wheels about eighty centimetres in diameter on its sides. These were firmly attached to its body and would not rotate at all. Instead of a carriage, the Mimic assumed the form of a slightly misshapen spool. As long as it was like this, it could roll around as much as it wanted.

Then came another problem: propulsion. Moving about like this under its own power was going to be difficult, to say the least. It would need a push to get going and yet more pushing to keep rolling. Going downhill was going to be easy enough, but it was still dependant on outside assistance. After all, it couldn't just push itself.

Or could it? Technically speaking, the ground wasn't that far away and it still had a good deal of Biomass to spare. So it grew out a set of four spiderish limbs, much shorter than the usual ones. They were also positioned much differently. One poked out from its front, a second from behind, the third from its bottom, and the last from the top of its lid. Preparations complete, Boxxy then coiled the leg on the bottom and kicked at the ground with it, pushing itself forward and up.

This got the chest rolling ever so slightly forward. Then the leg coming out from its front did the same, then the top leg, then the hind leg, then the bottom leg. Each kick added more momentum to its revolution, and soon it was rolling along at an impressive pace. Its current speed was actually close to its full sprint, but it used only a fraction of the effort required to maintain it.

It was moving forward in an energy-efficient manner and without hurting itself. So far so good. But the problem was that this method made its entire body spin around along with the wheels. Even with the monster's magical perception it 'looked' like the ground was spinning around it at high speeds and gave off the unpleasant sensation that it was constantly falling. Deciding it'd had enough, Boxxy hit the brakes by causing its wheels to break apart into legs of their own. The sturdy limbs dug into the ground, killing the monster's momentum in an instant. And none too soon; a few metres more and it would have fallen into that deep canyon that ran alongside the cobblestone road.

"Wow, I was sure it was gonna fall off the cliff!" remarked Xera.

"Tell me about it," agreed Kora. "I guess even that loony box isn't stupid enough to throw itself off a cliff."

The two familiars were currently taking a break between their lewd acts, though it was mostly to let the fiend recover. Even a rape-happy demon from another dimension couldn't keep up with the insatiable succubus's

demands. That was the reason both of them were idly observing Boxxy's antics while still connected at their lower ends.

"I guess all that INT gain wasn't just for show after all, huh?" mused Xera while slowly massaging the half-mast member lodged in her rectum.

"Nah, can't be that. I mean I'm always the same regardless of how much INT I have, so it can't be that big a deal."

"You're right, it really doesn't matter for you. You'd need over 9,000 of that Attribute before you get any thoughts worth a damn."

"As if! I have plenty of thoughts!" insisted the fiend.

"Any of them that don't relate to fighting and/or fucking?"

" … No."

"And that is precisely why I keep telling you to just disappear and leave your dick behind."

"Oh I'm definitely going to leave my dick inside a behind!"

"Ugh, that was terribleeeaaaah!"

Break time was over. Kora's member had suddenly sprung back to life, allowing the two demons to pick up where they left off. Meanwhile, Boxxy was already thinking hard about its latest experience. The spool-chest accomplished its goals of conserving energy while travelling at high speed, but the inability to properly navigate and steer under such conditions was a major drawback. It would need to keep its body upright and relatively stable if it planned to do either of those things. Its thoughts drifted back to that cart, causing it to once again contemplate whether it should form 'detached' wheels after all.

It instinctively knew that would be pointless, but it was worth a shot. It picked itself up off the ground and grew another, much smaller wheel. It attached it to the axle part in exactly the same way as the carriage did, then 'let go' of it.

[You have lost a part of your body. HP -25.]

Forcefully separating a part of its flesh caused Boxxy to lose HP and Biomass. The wheel itself quickly lost pigmentation and consistency and melted into a sort of unidentifiable dull-red sludge over the next few

seconds, making the whole exercise a waste of time and energy. Such was the downside of having extremely malleable flesh. Once cut away it would quickly lose its assumed form and turned into to what could only be described as a thick, fleshy soup.

The Mimic was aware this would happen, but it tried it anyway. It actively challenged its instincts in order to get better acquainted with its body. It waited for several seconds for its HP to recover to full, just in case, then tried it again to hold onto the wheel without being directly connected to it.

[You have lost a part of your body. HP -25.]

It failed, just as expected. Simply touching the flesh of the wheel was not enough, it needed a medium through which to transmit nutrients and commands to it. It had to be attached and detached at the same time. Both a part of it and something else entirely. Was such a paradox possible?

Or rather, was stressing over this really that big a deal? Boxxy could survive just as well without ever needing to use wheels. Sure, they looked convenient, but that was only on mostly flat terrain, of which the wilderness had a shocking shortage of. Objectively speaking, the box had no reason for wanting wheels. They were, simply put, not necessary to its survival in any way, shape, or form. In fact, given how it had lost quite a bit of HP and nearly threw itself into a ravine, they were more of an enemy than an ally at that point.

But the Mimic did not give up. It was a creature born of patience, to the point where it was incredibly stubborn and would very rarely change its stance on something. The last time it did that was when the object of its desire ended up causing a magical disaster that wiped out an entire city in an instant. It was safe to assume that it would take a downside of that grand a scale to make it give up on experimenting with those wheels.

And so Boxxy entered a cycle of growing a wheel and trying to detach it without detaching it, watching it melt into sludge, waiting a short while to recover HP and starting all over again. That lasted for about thirty minutes before it stopped to take a small break and devour yet another normally suicidal amount of strawberry jam to maintain its Biomass.

While there was no progress on the wheel front, at least it was starting to enjoy the fruit-based condiment somewhat. The taste was still bland, but the

thick consistency of it was oddly pleasing. It reminded the Mimic of the only piece it managed to rip off that Fleshmaiden and how it had reverted into a tasty, viscous goop that was a lot denser than it seemed to be. If there was ever such a thing as jam made out of flesh, it would be that. It even remembered finding a piece of her stuck between its teeth later, which was a pleasant surprise. How could something so goopy be so sticky? It was almost like it wanted to become a part of –

"… Huh."

Struck with a burst of inspiration, the Mimic spent the rest of the night fiddling with and refining the all-important wheel-to-axle joint. After numerous failures and having to replenish its Biomass many times, it finally achieved a halfway working prototype.

It had created a limb that was completely unlike anything else it or its familiars had ever seen before and something that had no right being part of a living creature. The middle portion was a solid disc with a radius of about six centimetres. Twenty-five-centimetre-long spokes then came out of it to form the rest of the wheel. The connecting joint between it and the axle leg was also very different from its previous attempts. The unnatural hinge was covered by an equally unnatural wet bulge – a ball of writhing red flesh around eight centimetres in diameter. It tightly hugged both parts of the solid inner part of the wheel, creating a vacuum-tight seal that was also slippery enough to allow the wheel to turn with minimal friction.

And turn it did.

Boxxy lifted its latest iteration above the ground and stretched out a tongue tentacle. It grabbed one of the spokes and gave it a good yank. It spun smoothly and silently around its axis. Nothing tore up and the wheel didn't wither. Except that the tentatively-named 'flesh jam' started leaking around it and splattering everywhere. The exact mix for it needed to be refined, but that was just a minor detail at that point.

The solution Boxxy had managed to stumble onto was the process known as osmosis. It was a mechanism that allowed nutrients to pass between the Mimic and its severed limb by using the 'flesh jam' as a medium. It essentially kept the wheel 'alive,' even after the Mimic had severed the

solid connection to it. It was even able to send and receive nerve signals, allowing its owner to retain some feeling in it.

Satisfied with the slightly flawed result, Boxxy decided it was time for a field test. It made three other wheels and returned to its box-cart form. The issue of propulsion was quickly resolved by sprouting two short spider-like legs from its underside, much like how it had done earlier. It used them to push itself forward along the cobblestone road. The wheels spun smoothly, clattering slightly at the small bumps between the rough cobbles. Boxxy bent its axle-shaped limbs carefully, altering its course ever so slightly while a lone eye on its side gave it perfect vision as to where it was going.

Like this, it had propulsion, navigation, and steering.

“YEESHAAAAAAAAA!” it screamed as it rolled down the road at a near-walking pace.

Its over-eagerness had gotten the best of it several times already, so for once it was being careful. This lasted for all of ten seconds before it began gradually building up speed as it used its two limbs to push itself faster and faster. Soon it was moving faster than it had ever done so before, and only using about half the energy it needed to maintain its full speed. The joy of succeeding at a difficult task as well as the rush of moving at such speed filled Boxxy with an overflowing feeling of glee. The intoxicating rush made it want to shout something about yabba-ing a dabba, even though it had no idea what any of those words were.

It kept practising with its newfound mobility. Acceleration, abrupt turns, and instant braking were all made possible with the right use of its wheeled limbs. It could even hop into the air at speed to get over rough portions of the cobblestone road. Eventually the Mimic realised it had ended up straying too far from its familiars. It could order them to catch up or re-summon them on the spot, but it felt like a good opportunity to get some more box-carting practice on the way back. Besides, it had eaten a good chunk of the preserved food it pilfered earlier, so its Storage was now empty enough to bring a lot more of those curious – albeit not very useful – items it left behind.

“Get ready, we leave soon,” it commanded as soon as it got back.

The two demons, who had been going at it all night, finally remembered they still had a contract to fulfil, so they stopped their silly antics and promptly got ready to hit the road.

“Hey, boss?” asked Kora. “Why were you trying to copy the cart all night?”

It had been obvious what it was trying to do given how obsessed it was with those wheels. Even the two demons who spent the whole night doing lewd things had managed to figure out what its goal was. The Mimic then explained it was developing a more energy efficient mode of transport for itself, though perhaps not precisely in those words.

“So … you want to travel without getting as tired?” confirmed Kora after the needlessly long explanation.

“Yes,” it answered.

“You could just rest on the cart and have me pull it around you know.”

“…”

“Actually if we did that, we could even bring all this stuff with us.”

“…”

“Not to mention that –”

SNIKT

“Gahaaaah!” screamed Kora at the mithril dagger that mysteriously appeared in her left eye. “Whyyy! AARGH!”

“No reason,” came the casual reply.

Truthfully speaking, Boxxy wasn’t quite sure why it had done that. There was just something about having Arms point out the painfully obvious solution that really ticked it off.

Chapter Two
Fine Print

Part One

Three trolls were rushing through the forest. The creatures were roughly two metres tall and resembled apes due to their thick necks, short legs, and powerful arms that were almost as long as they were tall. A troll's skin was a thick, brown hide that looked like it could take quite a lot of punishment, and the numerous scars covering these three individuals suggested that they put that claim to the test on a regular basis. Short, brown fur could be seen covering their backs, shoulders, and forearms, giving off a pungent smell. Their faces were truly ugly, with massive foreheads, beady pitch-black eyes, large flat noses and massive underbites that made their disgusting yellow teeth visible to all.

These three monsters, however, were not rushing towards some prey they'd caught a whiff of, but running for their very lives. Swinging from branches, charging through bushes, and jumping over rocks, all while practically foaming at the mouth from fear. The agility with which they moved seemed to belie their thick, hulking frames, as nothing motivated the body quite like the imminent threat of death. It was just too bad that mere motivation was nowhere near enough to allow them to escape their pursuer.

"Mind Blast ~♪" came an oddly melodic voice from above.

[Your target has been stunned for 7 seconds.]

A light blue flash enveloped the head of one of the ape-like creatures. It let out a pathetic yelp and fell down on the ground as if it had momentarily forgotten how limbs worked. A rectangular shadow then leapt down onto it and stuck two shining daggers into either side of its skull, killing it instantly.

The other two trolls kept running without missing a beat. So what if one of their kin was just killed? Stopping to fight that thing was suicide. They should know. Some of the others had already tried and failed horribly. The one to fall just now was the tenth victim and the two running away with all

their might were the last survivors. As one might imagine, they were quite keen to keep it that way, but a certain murderous box had other intentions as it gave chase.

A few minutes and a couple of Mind Blasts later, the last of the trolls was wiped out. No matter how much their fear aided in their escape, the smaller, lighter and more versatile Mimic had the clear advantage in this obstacle-ridden terrain. Also, its AGI Attribute was much higher than that of its quarry, which was a big contributor towards its speed advantage. It chucked the two corpses into its Storage and went back to the shallow cave the monsters had been inhabiting until recently.

Trolls were a species of monster that was common throughout the world. It had many variants that depended on their environment. Subspecies such as Cave Trolls, Forest Trolls, Magma Trolls, Ice Trolls, Zombie Trolls, and even Bridge Trolls all had their own unique characteristics and varied widely in strength. However, three things held true among all trolls.

The first two traits they shared were their tough hides that resisted physical blows and the high-speed regeneration that could heal wounds many times faster than other creatures. Indeed, trading blows with a troll that was of equal or higher Level was tantamount to suicide. The best way to kill one was to exploit their universal weakness: magic. Fire or acid was particularly effective in that regard, but employing methods that involved either of those things would often leave very little of the creatures behind. That was simply bad business. After all, troll hides could be fashioned into sturdy – albeit heavy – leather armour, and their blood was a substance with many arcane and alchemical uses.

In fact, said blood was the whole reason for Boxxy's little detour.

While travelling along the road, the Mimic had come across a monster dragging the bloodied carcass of what appeared to be a wild boar. Xera immediately identified it as a troll; that wasn't particularly impressive considering their appearance was general knowledge to any civilized being above the age of five. Which was a good thing, too, because that denomination did not include her three-month-old master. The animate chest and its two minions then chased after their target until it led them to its den – a shallow cave it shared with eleven more of its kin.

So, all things said and done, Boxxy now had a dozen completely intact troll corpses it could harvest for blood. Since its goal wasn't to just kill and eat them, it had to avoid riddling them with wounds like it usually did to its targets. Statistically speaking though, that statement wasn't quite right. The overwhelming majority of the Mimic's victims were vaporized by a dungeon core going through critical meltdown, but 'riddled with wounds' was definitely second place on that list. Followed closely by 'ripped apart' and 'torn asunder,' which were neck-and-neck for the bronze medal.

The point was that all of those methods caused massive blood loss, which would be counterproductive considering its goal. In the end it had to settle for disabling them with magic and piercing their skulls, minimizing the holes through which they could bleed out. Surprisingly, it ended up having to use Mind Blast rather than Shadowbind to do so.

[Mind Blast]
Requirements: Level 22 Warlock, INT 100, MNT 100
School: Domination
Type: Targeted
Cost: 200 MP
Range: 40 metres
[Effects]
Assaults the target's consciousness directly, stunning it for 5 seconds.
Has no effect on Undead, Demons, and Golems.

[Shadowbind]
Requirements: Level 20 Warlock, INT 120
School: Ruin
Type: Targeted
Cost: 100MP
Range: 25 metres
[Effects]
Chains of darkness wrap around the target, restricting movement for up to 10 seconds.
Grows in power in dark places or at night, gaining up to 50% additional effectiveness depending on the environment.

The latter seemed to be more powerful at a glance. It had a lower MP cost and a longer effective duration, at least on paper. The problem was that

these chains were more fragile than the Mimic thought, seeing as how those trolls broke free of the physical restraints within moments. Their speed left something to be desired, but their brute strength would not allow them to be subdued by this Spell without using Power Overwhelming or taking advantage of the darkness-associated bonus.

The problem was that the former would consume too much MP and the latter was out of the question in the daylight. Even then it might not be enough to tie down the trolls for long. Mental attacks, on the other hand, were incredibly effective. Those monsters may have been powerful in body, but they were pathetic when it came to mental fortitude. Or defending against magic in general.

And thus the Mimic learned an important lesson: Mind Blast was effective against opponents that relied on brawn, and Shadowbind looked to be more useful against Caster-type enemies that typically had weaker bodies. And if someone who was proficient in both might and magic showed up, then they would just have to be sliced up the old-fashioned way. Thankfully, these trolls could be taken down without spilling much of their blood, though it took some time. Kora's blunt force attacks were particularly useful since they didn't cause any external bleeding, but it still took her a lot of effort to overwhelm their defences.

Unless, of course, Boxxy used the Dark Infusion Spell on her.

[Dark Infusion]
Requirements: Level 17 Warlock, INT 60, MNT 80
School: Domination
Type: Targeted
Cost: 75 MP
Range: 10 Metres
[Effects]
Increases your target's STR, AGI, DEX and INT Attributes by 20% for 30 seconds.
Your target will be stunned for 5 seconds once the effect expires or is dispelled.
The stun component of this Spell has no effect on Undead, Demons, and Golems.

This Spell actually boosted those four Attributes by 28% thanks to the effects of the Domination Mastery Skill, which was currently at Level 4. The duration of the power-up was still half a minute, so it would be safe to assume the stun that followed it was equally unaffected by the related Mastery. The upshot in physical ability Arms displayed was truly impressive, however. It made Boxxy curious as to just how powerful it would get if it were to use Dark Infusion on itself, though it immediately found out such a thing was impossible.

Domination Spells – Dark Infusion included – had no effect on the one using them. After all, that entire school of magic was centred around forcing the caster's will onto others, so something like affecting one's own mind was impossible. Admittedly, even if Boxxy could empower itself, it wasn't sure whether Dark Infusion would have as pronounced an effect as it did on Arms. Not only was STR the fiend's most well-developed attribute, but she also had a special Skill that made each point of it way more potent.

[Idiotic Strength]
Fiends are by nature demons with more brawn than brains, but this trait is noticeably more pronounced in Pit Fiends.
Requirements: Be born as a Pit Fiend
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases the effects of the STR Attribute by 5% per Level of this Skill.
Reduces the effects of the INT Attribute by 5% per Level of this Skill.

Although this seemed like it would be just as detrimental as it was beneficial, it was also a Skill that was almost uniquely tailored for someone like Arms. She was a demon who fought entirely with physical means and didn't really need to spend MP in order to pummel something into dust. Therefore, the already tiny MP pool becoming even tinier was a moot point. Even the active Skills from her Fiend Job didn't care that she currently had less than 150 MP.

[Second Wind]
Fiends are by nature too stubborn to die.
Requirements: Level 10 Fiend
Type: Active

Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 0 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Instantly recovers 25% of missing HP.
Increases the HP recovered by this Skill by 20% per Level of this Skill.
This Skill may not be activated more than once every 24 hours.

[Demonic Carapace]
Fiends are by their nature incredibly thick-skinned.
Requirements: Level 15 Fiend
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 50% of max MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Reduces all incoming damage by 30% for 10 seconds.
Increases the duration of this Skill by 10% per Level of this Skill.

Second Wind was an enviable Skill, one the Mimic badly wanted for itself. Unfortunately, it was something that only a fiend could use. Which wasn't all that bad, as it was possible to bypass the 24-hour usage restriction on it if Arms died and was re-summoned. This was because, barring a few notable exception, the powers and abilities gained from one's Status were bound to their physical bodies. Re-summoning the fiend and giving her a brand new body would give her a fresh, unused copy of all her Skills, this one included.

As for Demonic Carapace, it was a Skill that appeared after the dungeon core meltdown caused the Mimic's Level to skyrocket. Activating this Skill caused Kora's entire body to temporarily become covered in grey metal scales that glistened with an unnatural red sheen. The material seemed to be the same 'Fiend Steel' substance that her gauntlets and boots were made of.

Incidentally, the creation of said items was handled by her Demonic Armaments Skill, and their performance would increase in direct proportion to its Level. Arms could take them off any time she wished, though doing so would make them disappear in seconds. They would also take a few hours

to ‘grow’ back, so removing them accomplished nothing but to neuter both the demon’s attack and defence.

As for Snack, all of her equipment was largely decorative, serving no practical purpose other than helping her bamboozle her victims.

Which wasn’t to say that familiars were barred from wielding gear made by and for mortals. It was just the case that very few summoners saw the need to do something silly like give actual arms or armour to their demons. While it would make them more effective, it also meant that those items would most likely be lost when the demon was slain in combat. Which happened a lot, as they were often treated like the expendable pawns that they were. This was especially true of fiends who traditionally had no other method of attack except engaging enemies in close combat. So it was a good thing they came with their own custom-made equipment; otherwise they wouldn’t be anywhere near as good at their jobs.

Boxxy returned to the former troll den while reviewing what it knew about its minions. Even if it lacked much of the world’s common sense and general knowledge, the Mimic’s combat instincts and battle awareness were rapidly developing. It recognized it had to be well-versed in the strengths and weaknesses of all participants in a fight if it wanted to secure victory, so analyzing its familiars was something it did a lot during the downtime when they were travelling.

Speaking of which, Boxxy found one of said minions – namely Arms – was busy handling the nine troll corpses the Mimic had left behind. She was squeezing them one after the other, coaxing the blood out of their stiffening bodies as if she was getting juice out of a lemon. The bodily fluids were collected in a large barrel that used to be full of strawberry jam until the animate chest devoured it all to fuel its biowheel research.

“Drain these too,” it commanded while taking the last three corpses out of its Storage.

“Oh hey, boss. It’s fine if a few extra bits get into the stuff, right?” asked Kora, wringing out a troll’s arm as if it were a wet cloth. “I can’t seem to get the blood out without getting clumps of hair and broken bones in it.”

“It’s fine,” declared the Mimic.

“Alright, cool. Are these the last ones, then?”

“Yes.”

“Thank fuck! This blood-wrangling thing is really fucking dull! Ah, it would go faster if Master buffed me up again! So … can you do that?” she added with a hint of anticipation in her voice.

“Okay.”

Boxxy saw no reason to deny her request since its MP was almost back to full and she would be doing all the work anyway. The knock-off Xera appeared instantly as if she had been hiding inside the chest the whole time and raised a hand towards the giddy fiend.

“Dark Infusion ~♪!”

A black mist enveloped Kora in an instant. It seeped into her skin, turning it several shades darker. Her already well-defined muscles bulged out even more as her entire body became one size wider, straining the thin fabric of her white top and hotpants. The already skin-tight clothing dug into her flesh, conforming perfectly to her form. It was at a stage where she might as well have been nude for all the good it did.

“Ohh, yeaaaah!” she growled, rubbing her hands all over her body. “This stuff makes me feel amazing! Like I can beat the shit out of a steel golem with three arms tied behind my back!”

She then went back to squeezing the blood out of yet another dead troll with great gusto. The syrupy red liquid and other miscellaneous bits that poured out of it was collected inside the wooden barrel at significantly greater speeds. The disgusting soup was actually going to fill the former jam container to the brim at this rate, which suited Boxxy just fine. After all, it needed that blood to get started on performing demonic rituals and increasing the Proficiency Level of its Demonology Skill. Getting that all the way to Level 8 seemed like it would take a long time, but it would be well worth the investment. Having an extra familiar was going to be a huge boon, considering both of its current minions were quite excellent.

The animate chest even became a tiny bit jealous whenever it took a glance at Arms’s status.

[General Information]
Koralenteprix Khusuuszun Caonthioxxaa

Fiend (Pit), Female, 321 years old
Level 17.61 Fiend
Level 12.45 Berserker
1230/1282 HP (+1.9/sec)
144/178 MP (+0.3/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 254, DEX 105, AGI 148, END 198, INT 42, WIS 33, MNT 165

That STR Attribute was especially enviable, as it was pretty much double what the Mimic had. Admittedly, she had Dark Infusion boosting her abilities, but she still had just under 200 STR even without it. Looking at that Attribute score and then considering the muscle-bound behemoth it was empowering left little doubt that Kora's attacks would be far more devastating than Boxxy's. The only way the Mimic could keep up with her was if Assassination or Ruin magic came into play, but even then those would only provide a burst of destructive power compared to the fiend's ceaseless barrage of fists.

The shapeshifter would reach an equivalent conclusion if it compared itself with Xera, who was arguably already a more dangerous Spell-slinger than Boxxy was.

"Ah … Master! It ran out – more please!"

"Dark Infusion~♪!"

Boxxy was steadily starting to feel the downside of splitting its Level and Attributes between martial combat and the mystic arts. Using both at the same time was pretty much impossible, after all. Crystallize Magic helped, but that was a temporary solution that lasted only as long as it had Spell Crystals. It was theoretically possible to prepare more of those while in combat, but the Mimic might as well just cast its Spells directly at the enemy to preserve MP. Assassination was the opposite in that regard; the Mimic wanted to use it repeatedly in combat, but the nature of the Skill made that an impossibility.

In short, Boxxy's combat effectiveness would deteriorate rapidly as a battle went on. A lot of its damage was front-loaded, after all. While it was true such things weren't much of a problem right now, that would change rapidly if it came face-to-face with another worthy opponent like that steel

grate or the Fleshmaiden. The Mimic was starting to understand it would need to rely on its familiars a lot more than initially anticipated, so it was honestly quite pleased with how they had turned out.

“Master? More?” Kora asked expectantly.

“Dark Infusion~♪!”

Both demons could keep fighting for a long time, thereby covering one of its weaknesses. They could also be used as expendable sacrifices to cover the Mimic’s retreat should the need arise. It was the least they could do, considering how much work Boxxy put into training its demon-related Skills. Strengthening them was the only reason it bothered with this troll blood business to begin with.

“Master, I found some more trolls,” reported Snack through the thought-link. “There’s roughly six of them, about two kilometres south of where you are.”

The succubus was currently under orders to seek out other potential prey from the sky, although that was mostly an excuse to get her away from the troll den. If she were to use her fire magic, the only thing left of those trolls would be ash and cinders. Even a three-month-old box knew it couldn’t get blood from those, though Boxxy began to question if it really needed any more of the stuff.

“Arms, are you done yet?”

“Pretty much, this is the last one,” answered the fiend.

Admittedly her brutish method of extracting the monsters’ bodily fluids was by no means ideal, but it seemed to be effective.

“How much blood?” asked Boxxy.

“Barrel’s kinda full, actually.”

In other words, sixty litres of troll blood. Admittedly it wasn’t ‘pure’ since there were some miscellaneous bits floating inside, but that was surely more than enough.

“Snack, forget the monsters and come back. I need you for the ritual.”

“Yes, Master.”

The first ritual on the list was a ceremony called ‘An Offering to Nagnamor.’ It was fairly straightforward, requiring only some troll blood, a sharp knife and a pure maiden to be used as a sacrifice. Boxxy now had ample amounts of the first two things, but the third had proven to be a problem since it wasn’t quite sure where it would get a suitable victim. At least until it realised that Snack was rather overqualified for the job. Not only was she effectively immortal and therefore ‘reusable,’ but she was also a woman who was neither poisoned nor diseased.

Which was definitely what the ritual called for when it referred to a ‘pure maiden.’

Okay, maybe not ‘definitely,’ but that was probably sort of what it meant.

There was a chance she was close enough, at the very least.

Part Two

“Uhm, Master?” said Xera with more than a hint of worry in her voice. “Are you sure you want to be –”

“Be quiet! I’m busy!”

Boxxy really did not have the luxury to converse with Snack right now. This was its first time making occult sigils and it needed to focus. Even if the Demonology Skill provided the knowledge of how these symbols should look, actually drawing them turned out to be a surprisingly difficult task. Especially when using thick, sticky troll blood as the paint and the uneven, grassy ground of the forest as the canvas. At least it had a decent brush, courtesy of the ransacked caravan from a few days ago.

First it made a four-and-a-half-metre-wide circle of blood, which was pretty straightforward. Then it stuck a wooden stake right in the middle, tied Xera to it and smeared her face with yet more blood. Then it had to draw four large symbols on the ground. They were quite squiggly and complicated and messing up even once meant that it would have to create the ritual site from scratch.

Kora was doing her best to simply watch the Mimic work without uttering a peep, which was easier said than done. Laughter welled up within her every

time she glanced at the ‘pure maiden’ tied to the stake and she tried her best to keep quiet, lest her master tie her up instead. She wasn’t quite sure what this ritual was supposed to do, but at the very least it was bound to be interesting. Especially considering how messed up the preparation was.

Xera was thinking much the same, although she wasn’t looking forward to the ceremony as much. Mostly because she had a feeling something profoundly stupid was about to take place, with her as the centre.

Boxxy kept preparing for the ritual for about ten more minutes before it was done. The patterns it drew on the ground matched perfectly with those depicted by the Demonology Skill, so it concluded that this part of the preparation was done. All that was left was to speak out the incantation and kill the sacrifice. The incantation itself was long and had a bunch of difficult words, which presented a problem. The Mimic was worried it would flub the incantation and ruin it, but at least it was confident that it could stab someone through the heart without missing.

“ … Huck!”

That was when Boxxy remembered demons didn’t actually have hearts. It understandably felt a bit cheated; all that hard work for naught. Stupid demons, they should’ve told it sooner they didn’t have hearts. Of course, it completely ignored the fact that it never even asked them and just one-sidedly decided it was their fault. Ah, but there might be a way around this.

“Snack, can you grow a heart inside your body?”

Xera was technically a shapeshifter herself, so her master assumed she should have been capable of such a basic task.

“No, Master. My shapeshifting only affects my outside appearance.”

Okay, maybe it wouldn’t be *that* easy.

“ … Then can you grow one on the outside?”

“Umm … Maybe? I’ve never tried … ”

“Then try it now!”

The succubus, who had her hands and feet tied behind her back against the wooden pole, looked down at her breasts. Well, she was trying to look at her stomach, but that was kind of impossible considering the sheer size of her

cleavage. A small red pimple sprouted out of her tummy and grew rapidly in size until it became a sort of messy lump. It seemed that the succubus was struggling to replicate the organ in question.

“No, no, that’s wrong,” said Boxxy after a while.

One of its tongue tentacles extended out until the moist tip was right in front of Xera’s face. It then grew out slowly and steadily to form a perfect replica of a standard human heart.

“Make one like this.”

“Err … can you do that again?”

Xera spent the next half hour carefully mimicking the Mimic until she was able to copy the vital organ to a satisfying degree. It was even beating, though it only pumped air. Honestly though, the succubus was a little irked that her master was better than her at this stuff, but it couldn’t be helped. That murderous box was rapidly becoming something akin to a virtuoso of the flesh, so her superficial skills had no way of matching its natural-born talents. Moreover it was intimately familiar with hearts in particular. They were one of its favourite snacks, while Xera had never really seen one. Well, not intact and unblemished at least.

“Good,” said Boxxy after confirming her external heart was in order. “Okay, now be quiet and stand still.”

Next came the verbal part. It would be difficult to pronounce these words under normal circumstances, so the Mimic’s giant lipless mouth was bound to mess it up. Thankfully, it already had just the solution to that problem. The pseudo-Xera made her appearance yet again, forcing the succubus to stare ‘herself’ right in the eye with no option of turning away or objecting. As for Kora, she simply continued to watch the bizarre scene.

Once Boxxy felt confident enough to start, it coughed a few times to clear its newly made throat and started speaking with a clear, crisp voice.

“Praesent gravida at ipsum in cursus. Phasellus urna ipsum, maximus et velit vel, sodales pharetra purus.”

A cold gust of air swept through the ritual site.

“Maecenas varius dui vel enim finibus consequat. Morbi id cursus libero.”

The wind started twisting and spinning around, just outside the circle of blood. The dust and sand it kicked up made it seem like there was a miniature tornado with Xera in the centre.

“Donec scelerisque ligula non odio vulputate blandit. Cras lacinia elit at massa bibendum feugiat.”

Boxxy’s voice grew louder and deeper with each spoken word and seemed to echo unnaturally throughout the area. It was almost as if a second being was speaking alongside the Mimic in an unholy chorus.

“Sed congue vulputate faucibus. Fusce tincidunt commodo nibh quis elementum.”

The four bloody sigils on the ground started boiling and hissing, releasing a thin red vapour that was swept up in the bizarre air current.

“Maecenas at ante ut dui semper varius. Cras condimentum euismod lorem id egestas.”

Boxxy raised an iron dagger above its head, gripping it with both arms. The red smog started flowing towards it, seeping into the unblemished metal and tainting it with a bright crimson sheen.

“Aliquam mollis, sem quis viverra egestas, mauris nulla porta odio, in euismod nisl sapien sit amet justo.”

The dagger started vigorously draining the Mimic’s MP. It glowed brighter and brighter, absorbing every last drop of Boxxy’s mystical energy within the span of a few seconds. Once it had absorbed it all, it began vibrating and shaking within its grasp as if it wanted to escape.

“Sed ornare dolor erat! Quis placerat augue dignissim et!”

Boxxy slowly lowered the mana-imbued weapon and pointed it at the external heart of its familiar.

“Praesent ultricies Nagnamor!”

Uttering the final three words, it thrust the dagger forward, piercing the succubus’s heart completely.

“Wait!” screamed Kora in a panic. “Did you just say *Nagnamor!*”

But it was too late. Whatever the fiend was trying to say was lost in Xera's wailing and screaming. A bright red light poured out of her wound, as well as her eyes and mouth as she gave voice to her suffering. Her bound body rose gradually in the air, uprooting the wooden stake she was tied to and lifting it along with the rest of her. She reached an altitude of about four metres as the light pouring out of her grew in intensity until it rivalled that of the sun.

The earth shook, the winds blew, the trees caught fire, and the clouds ran away. It all ended abruptly when Xera's body exploded with a white flash and a huge bang. The shockwave was more powerful than any magic the Mimic could muster and covered a stupidly wide area. Both Boxxy and Kora were thrown back and tumbled along the ground for several metres. When the spider-chest regained its footing, it immediately turned its attention to the source of the explosion.

Snack was gone. In her place was a seven-metre-tall humanoid creature. It had massive black goat hooves for feet, with thick, grey fur covering its legs up to its knees. Its thighs were enclosed with chalk-black metal greaves adorned with what appeared to be countless skulls. Its gauntlets, bracers, shoulder pads, and chest plate all had the same macabre design. A long, relatively thin tail protruded from its rear and ended in a tuft of grey hair, much like a lion's. A pair of gigantic wings similar to Xera's sprouted from its back.

Its head was a wide, flaming skull with a protruding snout and jaws filled with sharp teeth. The head looked more like a dragon than a human. One thick, short horn adorned the tip of its snout while two more protruded outwards from the back of its head, curving in towards each other as if to form a giant circle of pitch-black bone. The unquenchable flames pouring out of its nostrils, eyes, mouth, and the back of its head threatened to burn this world to ashes.

And most terrifying of all was the gigantic glaive it held in one hand. A single swing from that weapon was enough to cut down dozens of men. Four blood-red sigils – exactly the same as the ones the Mimic had drawn earlier – adorned the length of the blade, emitting an ominous-looking crimson fog.

“WHO DARES CALL UPON ME!” it roared, spewing lava-like drool from its mouth.

The creature – no, the *demon* – looked around for the one who had performed the ritual, but the only things around were a bewildered pit fiend, a barrel of blood, and a plain wooden chest.

Boxxy was befuddled. The knowledge from Demonology stated this ritual would temporarily bring forth an unbound demon from the Beyond, but it said nothing about it being so outrageously terrifying. Which was precisely why it was currently trying its best to chest like it had never chested before!

“WAS IT YOU, INSECT!”

However, it was all for naught. The giant demon completely disregarded the flabbergasted Kora and pointed its massive weapon directly at the Mimic. With hiding clearly off the table, Boxxy began to weigh its options. Fighting this thing? Bad idea. Running away? Nope, not gonna happen considering the difference in size. Sitting and hoping the big fiery scary thing went away? That was just denying reality. Ultimately, the flabbergasted Mimic did the only thing it could think of. The same thing many of its victims had done, just before it had finished them off.

“Yes, it was me. Please don’t kill me.”

It would shamelessly beg and grovel for its life.

“HAH! HAHAHAHAHA! IT IS GOOD THAT YOU KNOW YOUR PLACE! TELL ME, LITTLE BUG, WHAT DID YOU HOPE TO GAIN FROM THIS COMMUNION?”

“Um, get stronger?”

“AH! SO YOU’RE AFTER POWER, HUUUH?”

“ … Yes.”

“I SEE! YOU SOUGHT TO MAKE MY STRENGTH INTO YOUR OWN, DID YOU!”

“Well no, I just –”

“SILENCE!” the demon screamed with a voice that seemed to extend to the far reaches of both heaven and earth. “YOU FACE NAGNAMOR! OVERLORD OF THE FLAMING LEGION!”

“Is that so?”

The Mimic replied with a casual tone that was completely ill-fitting with the situation. It had realised something that completely calmed it down.

“THAT IS RIGHT, PUNY MORTAL! THE ONE THAT STANDS BEFORE YOU IS OBLIVION INCARNATE! NONE WHO HAVE STOOD BEFORE NAGNAMOR HAVE BEEN SPARED!”

“Oh, that’s neat,” Boxxy said matter-of-factly. “Same here.”

Needless to say, its attitude did not do much to stifle the Overlord’s mounting ire.

“YOU DARE MOCK ME! TRIFLING BOX! YOUR ARROGANCE WILL BE YOUR UNDOING!”

Nagnamor raised his glaive with both arms and prepared to strike down the upstart chest. The Mimic had no hope of survival if that house-sized weapon hit it head-on. It was dead meat however one looked at it.

“RRRRAAAAR!”

WHOOSH

The mass of Fiend Steel moved so fast it seemed to vanish from its position and appear just centimetres away from the Mimic’s faux-wood shell. The wind pressure of the strike alone was powerful enough to knock over and uproot several trees in the surrounding area. It also sent Kora flying into the woods, as she hadn’t been able to clear the area as quickly and silently as she had hoped.

Yet despite all that, Boxxy remained perfectly unharmed.

“ … WHAT!”

Nagnamor stared dumbly at it. The flames in his eye sockets flickered a few times as if he was blinking in disbelief. He raised his weapon and once more swung down with all his might, but the result was pretty much the same. The third time did not pan out so well either.

“Sit down,” commanded the Mimic.

“DO NOT PRESUME TO GIVE ME –”

SLAM

Nagnamor's gigantic ass met the ground with a massive impact that caused a small tremor to travel through the soil. It happened involuntarily, as if it someone else was in control of his body.

" … WHAT!"

"Punch yourself."

SLAM

The giant demon's massive armoured fist made impact with his own skull, sending plumes of flames scattering about, nearly setting the forest on fire in the process.

"Again."

SLAM

The second blow made his jawbone crack.

"And again."

SLAM

And the third one broke off the horn on his snout.

"IM … POSSIBLE…" he muttered. "HOW ARE YOU DOING THIS!"

The Offering to Nagnamor was not that of a life, but a host. A physical body the powerful demon could possess in order to manifest himself in the physical realm. He would always appear in his true form and at the height of his power, but the amount of time he could maintain this state depended entirely on how much MP was used up in the ritual. Even if his visits to the mortal realm were short-lived, Nagnamor would be free to act as he pleased in order to make the most of them.

This time, however, was different.

The Mimic had realised two simple things during their brief conversation. The first was that it had been talking to this 'Overlord' though the thought-link normally reserved for its familiars. The second was that the notification confirming Xera had been banished from the physical realm never actually appeared. Trying to view her Status simply showed a screen with garbled nonsense and unknown symbols, but that wasn't of particular concern.

Because the physical form of Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila had been taken over and transformed by Nagnamor, Overlord of the Flaming Legion. It was technically still the same body.

"I own you."

And the stipulations of the summoning contract still applied to it.

Part Three

Ring-ring

Nagnamor could only maintain his physical form for about two minutes with the near 1,000 MP the Mimic supplied him with during the possession ritual. Once that was up, he would crumble into dust and disappear.

Ring-ring

That seemed to be the nature of how this particular ritual worked – the demon called forth from the Beyond would have tremendous power, but his body would deteriorate rapidly after a short while.

Ring-ring

The other Offering-type ritual the Mimic knew about – this one addressed to a being named Liusolra – would probably be the same. Unfortunately, it was quite a bit more involved, requiring more raw materials and multiple sacrifices to be made, so Boxxy couldn't 'whip it out' to see what it was all about.

Ring-ring

It was ultimately all the same, though. Even if it was temporary, having a high-ranking demon's servitude was simply a means to an end. Performing a ritual of that magnitude did wonders for its Demonology proficiency and it still had plenty of troll blood to go around. It had therefore repeated the Offering to Nagnamor a total of three times after the first and was currently getting ready for another encore.

Ring-ring

Snack seemed eager to complain about her role in it, though. Even Arms was trying to get her master to stop for some reason. As for Punchy, he was

understandably the most pissed off of all and complained the loudest. However, all of them were summarily told to ‘shut their teeth-holes’ and were ignored completely as the stubborn box continued to do whatever it wanted.

Ring-ring

But the one thing that could not be ignored so easily was that constant ringing noise inside the Mimic’s mind. It had been going on for the last hour or so, pretty much ever since the first time Punchy’s physical body turned to dust. It obviously wasn’t going to be silenced as easily as Boxxy’s familiars, the Overlord included.

Ring-ring

The main reason it was so grating, however, was because this was different from a simple sound. It was as if something was poking at the monster’s mind directly in an effort to get its attention.

Ring-ring

Well, it didn’t seem like the sound would just go away on its own, and even a creature of near-infinite patience could only take so much damned ringing. So it made the inevitable decision to address the problem directly.

Ring-ring

Luckily for the simple crate, the knowledge regarding what to do popped up into its mind the instant it stopped forcibly ignoring it.

Click

“Yes?”

All it had to do was answer the call.

“Freaking finally!” came the gruff, raspy, and slightly annoyed voice from the Beyond. “Hey, buddy. It’s Carl from Demons ‘R’ Us.”

“Hi, Carl.”

This was the first time Demons ‘R’ Us had contacted the Mimic directly. Admittedly, this was only the fourth time the Mimic had spoken to the organization’s representative, but that was beside the point.

“What’s this about?” Boxxy asked.

“Yeaaaah … So, listen, I’m calling about the whole Overlord Nagnamor thing you’ve been getting up to. We’ve received some troubling complaints, and I need to get your side of the story. Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?”

“I’m busy.”

“I won’t stop ringing until you answer me, by the way.”

“ … Alright, I’m listening.”

“Okay, so! How exactly did you summon the Overlord into the physical realm?”

“I did the ritual.”

“Which one?”

“With the squiggles and the chanting and the stabbing.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific.”

Pretty much all demonic rituals involved at least one of those things. A lot of the time it was all three at once.

“It was the offering thingy.”

“Then it was the Offering to Nagnamor after all, huh?”

“Yes, that.”

Taktaktak takataktakatak

“And how did you fulfil the ‘pure maiden stabbed in the heart’ part of the ceremony?” asked Carl.

“I told Snack to do it.”

“I’m sorry, Snack?”

“Yes.”

“Who’s that?”

“My familiar.”

“Um, which one?”

“The one with the hair and the legs.”

Carl took a deep breath before he continued. It was a matter of professional pride that he didn't allow himself to scream at the deranged toddler.

"The blue or red one?" he asked after reconsidering his approach.

"Blue."

Tak tak tatatak takatak

"Okay, and how do you suppose a succubus qualifies as a 'pure maiden?'"

"She's a female that wasn't poisoned or diseased. She was also clean. Before the blood, at least."

"Oh wow … Okay, it's starting to make sense now."

The thing about magic was that it relied heavily on the mind. Spells had a precise formula to them, so different people would get very similar results when casting the same one. The only real difference in that situation would be the magnitude of the magic invoked, barring the effects of Skills like Crystallize Magic. Rituals and such, however, were more freeform and could be easily influenced by one's perception and preconceptions. To put it another way, if the Mimic who didn't know any better sincerely believed that Xera was 'pure,' then she would be 'pure.' At least for the sake of completing the ritual.

"Leave it to those fucking idiots to leave in a loophole like that," Carl mumbled under his breath.

"Hm?"

"Ah, don't mind that. What about the heart part?"

"Made Snack grow one."

Taktak tak ta–

"Wait, what? But succubi shouldn't be able to change their insides to that degree!"

"Yeah. Had to show her how to make one from her skin. Because she's stupid."

"Wai-wai-wait, you ordered your familiar … to grow a heart on the *outside* of her body?"

“Yes.”

“Holy shit! I never would’ve even thought of that! That’s actually kind of impressive, in its own way!”

Taktak tak tak tatatatak tak

“Okay,” continued Carl, “and what was your purpose in summoning Nagnamor?”

“I wanted Skill proficiency for Demonology.”

“What, just that?”

“Yes.”

“No kingdoms you wanted toppled or ancient beings of terrible power to suppress?”

“Nope.”

“I see … Hold, please.”

Boop

An odd sound started playing inside the Mimic’s head. It wasn’t like anything the monster had ever heard before, but it was actually quite pleasant. Ah, this must be that music thing it vaguely knew about. Who knew sound could be so tasty? It sat there enjoying the tune for several minutes before Carl came back on the line.

Boop

“I apologize for that. Would you forward me your Status, please?”

“Okay, sending.”

“Ah, I see you got a na– Boxxy T. Morningwood? Pft! Hold, please! Kuhaha–”

Boop

Well, this was unlike Carl. Usually the demon was quick and to the point about demon-related business. It wasn’t like Boxxy had anywhere to go, though. It was currently gathering up mana for the next ritual and the music was tasty anyway, so it didn’t particularly mind waiting.

Boop

“Phew … Again, sorry about that Mister Morningw– **Cough** Morningwood.”

“Just Boxxy’s fine.”

The animate chest didn’t mind being called ‘Mister Morningwood,’ but Carl seemed unable to say it with a straight face for some reason. This irked the monster somewhat. If he wasn’t going to say the name properly, then he shouldn’t be saying it at all.

“Right then. See here, Boxxy, I’m gonna be straight with you. You can’t summon Overlord Nagnamor using your demon as collateral.”

“Why not?”

“It violates part of the summoning contract. The one where you promise to safeguard your familiar’s immortal soul against harm.”

Come to think of it, Xera was talking about her ego being consumed by Nagnamor’s terrible will or something like that. Boxxy didn’t see how that was an issue, so it just kept doing what it wanted as usual.

“I know you probably don’t understand,” Carl added, “so I’ll clarify. Cramming two demons into the same physical vessel like that? Worst case scenario: both of them could get fragmented or malformed. That wasn’t what you were trying to do, right?”

“No.”

“Good, cuz that’d be bad.”

“How bad?”

“We’d have to kill you.”

“That’s bad.”

“Indeed.”

“I understand. I’ll stop using Snack to summon Punchy.”

“Punchy?”

“Yeah. The big one with the head and the arms. He punches himself real good,” said Boxxy with a hint of admiration.

“Uh-huh. So listen, there’s one more thing I need to talk to you about. I don’t know what you made the Overlord do over there and I have no intention of prying, but he’s threatening to quit being an officer in the Demon King’s army if he so much as smells you again. I doubt he’d actually do it, but we here at Demons ‘R’ Us want to make extra sure that doesn’t happen. That’s why we’re prepared to offer you a deal.”

“A deal?”

“That’s right. You have to agree that you’ll never perform the Offering to Nagnamor ever again, regardless of who or what your sacrifice is. In return, we’ll provide you with a one-time boost of Demonology Proficiency up to Level 5.”

“Okay. I accept.”

“Alright. Hold, please.”

Of course it agreed. Increasing Demonology Levels was the reason Boxxy was doing this whole thing in the first place, so getting what it wanted with less work was not a bad thing. It was downright tasty, as a matter of fact. Besides, it took a whole lot of time and preparation to summon Punchy and it only lasted a few minutes. Even if the performance was excellent, his mileage was pretty bad.

“There, all set. I’ve added our agreement to your summoning contract. You should be getting your compensation shortly.”

[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 5. WIS +4. MNT +4.]

“I got it.”

“Good, that’s great. Phew! Hey, thanks for agreeing to that. I gotta say, it’s so much easier working with you than my regular clients.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. You’re uncomplicated and straightforward. It’s a breath of fresh air compared to those edgy idiots I have to work with usually. Always with the stupid comments like ‘You shall not pass!’ and ‘You have no power here!’ It’s like those dumbasses didn’t even properly read the summoning contract!”

Carl spent a few more minutes complaining about other Warlocks. Boxxy didn't really mind since it was fairly interesting listening to him.

"– and then he went and did it anyway! Can you believe that?"

"I guess?"

"Look, what I'm trying to say is, it's honestly refreshing to work with someone like you. This whole thing would've been a laugh if it wasn't for the actual Demon King breathing down my neck. Anyway, sorry for that little rant; I've been under a lot of pressure lately."

"It's alright."

Carl let out another tired sigh before he moved on to wrapping up his service call.

"So, just so we're clear – do not ever use that ritual again. Okay?"

"Okay."

"And don't use your familiars as sacrifices ever again, either! That's the important thing here! We wouldn't give a flying fuck if your rectangular ass died out there, but if a demon bites the big one because of your antics then even killing you 100,000 times wouldn't be enough payback! Understood?"

It was important to keep in mind that the summoning contract was indeed a partnership and not outright slavery. Generally speaking, what happened to a demon's physical form didn't matter to an immortal being in the grand scheme of things, but endangering the integrity of their soul was another story. It was the one thing that must never, under any circumstances, be tampered with. If that clause was violated, then their contractor getting killed would just be the beginning of his or her punishment. What followed next would be … well, suffice it to say oblivion would be a much more preferable option.

"You're lucky we caught this thing early," Carl said. "Another ten or so more rituals and the soul of Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila would have suffered irreversible damage, and you'd have been on your way to eternal torment!"

" … Carl, is my contract in danger?"

“Nah, you’re fine. It’s not like you were doing it on purpose. Besides, you cooperated readily, and both of your familiars testified as to your, uh, character. Therefore, the higher-ups have agreed to let you off with just a stern warning.”

So it seemed that Demons ‘R’ Us was going to take Boxxy’s actions as a simple misunderstanding rather than malicious intent.

“I see. Thanks, Carl.”

“Sure, just try and avoid pissing off my boss any more, yeah? Or else he might seriously terminate you.”

“How do I do that?”

“Ah, that’s actually pretty easy. You just keep doing what you do, only without the two things we talked about just now. Like, for real – don’t. And don’t take so long to answer if we’re the ones calling *you*, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Good, good. Haaah. ‘Kay, bye!”

Click

Well, that conversation was educational. Boxxy nearly stepped on quite the landmine there due to its own ignorance, but things had more or less worked out for the best.

“Alright, Snack, you can get down from there. Arms, untie her.”

“Oh thank fuck!” said Xera. “I really don’t know how much longer I could take sharing a body with that insufferable asshole!”

“Hey, come on,” Kora complained as she untied the succubus from the stake. “Uncle Naggy isn’t *that* bad.”

“Yes he is! The whole reason he wanted a ‘pure maiden’ is because – wait, *uncle*? He’s your kin?”

“Yeah. He’s the eldest of my dad’s forty-nine siblings. I only met him once or twice though.”

“Wow, that kind of makes things a lot worse.”

“What do you mean?”

“The first thought he had when he saw you was how he’d like to, and I’m quoting his head here, ‘split that fine ass on his dick.’”

“Oh! That’s high praise coming from an archfiend!”

“It is?”

“Of course!”

“…”

“Oy! Don’t give me that disgusted look! If a fiend says they want to stick it up your butt, it means they think highly of you!”

“Wow,” the succubus exclaimed, shaking her head. “I always suspected your kind were idiots, but that’s just ridiculous. What sort of twisted logic considers anal rape a sign of affection?”

“Who knows?” answered Kora with a shrug. “Probably the same kind that actively craves it like you do.”

“ … Yeah, okay. You got me there … Wait a minute! Is *that* why you’ve done me exclusively in the rear these past few days?!”

“What can I say? I’ve grown to like – no, that’s not quite right. I *tolerate* you more than I thought I would. Even if you’re a succubus, you’re incredibly slutty and your insides feel fantastic. Can’t help but grow attached to a girl like that!”

“S-shut up!” Xera blurted, slightly flustered. “Keep those disturbing thoughts to yourself, you fucking asshole!”

“Thanks for the compliment, sugar-tits! Hahahaha!”

“We’re leaving now,” said Boxxy, putting an end to their little exchange. “There are things I need to get.”

Even if they had leftover troll blood, that one ritual was all the Mimic was really equipped to do. They’d have to find components – and sacrifices – to enact some of the other ones. Of particular interest was a ceremony that was meant to call forth ‘Unholy Wealth,’ whatever that was. The knowledge about this shiny-sounding thing had flowed into Boxxy’s mind when its Demonology rose in Levels, so it was still parsing the relevant information. The Mimic would need quite a few things to pull that one off, not to mention it lacked knowledge about the Warlock Job in general.

The time for playing around in the wilderness was over. The need to take up residence inside a city was now top priority.

Chapter Three
Gainful Employment

Part One

The city of Erosa, which was part of the Lodrak Empire, stood on the banks of a river known as the Whispering Canal. Named after its calm waters and predictable currents, this body of water flowed in from the Sawblade Mountains to the north and kept going in a relatively straight line until it flowed out into the ocean. Its sprawling delta, some five kilometres south of the city, had formed the massive Whispering Marshes that spanned an area of roughly five hundred square kilometres.

To the West of Erosa lay the Troll Woods, named for the dominant species of monster that lived in those parts. The depths of this sprawling forest were wild and largely untamed, but it was still a valuable source of high-quality timber and magical ingredients. The numerous small villages that dotted its outskirts dedicated their time to lumbering, gathering, farming, and tending to the fertile soil. However, they had to constantly be on guard against monster attacks and bandit raids, which is why most of them had small, localized militias.

The city itself was in the southwestern corner of the Empire. Going beyond the Whispering Marshes or through the Troll Woods to the west would lead one to the shores of the Shimmering Ocean, at the edge of the continent. The relatively nearby Sawblade Mountains ran northwest by southeast through the middle of the Empire's territory, all the way to the western edge of the mainland.

With the mountains to the north and northeast and the Shimmering ocean to the south and west, this province was known as Cradle Valley. The only easily accessible land route in and out of this territory was to the east of the city of Erosa along the Imperial highway. This wide cobblestone road continued north out of the city and ran between the Whispering Canal to the east and Troll Woods to the west. Following this road north for about a week would lead travellers to the city of Monotal.

This Cradle Valley was one of the weakest and poorest areas of the Empire. Being mostly isolated from the heartland meant that traders, merchants, and travellers barely went through these parts. Although the city of Erosa was actually flourishing, this was mostly due to its geographical position near the entrance to the Valley. This was a far cry from the rest of the province, which was sparsely populated with only two cities, six towns and thirty-odd villages. The total population of the region was a mere 55,000, just barely more than the Imperial capital of Oshinas.

Or at least that was what it should have been about two weeks ago. The Calamity of Monotal that killed over eight thousand of the empire's citizens was one thing, but the aftershocks of the event were still underway. Rumours spread of a foul green mist that spread outwards from the former city – a thick miasma that poisoned the very ground and air. The subsequent investigation by the emperor's Spymaster had revealed the depth and breadth of this Calamity to the crown and the young emperor had passed a decree that the government would spearhead an effort to contain and repair the damage to the land.

The Empire's response to this catastrophe would have been far slower if it wasn't for Bernard Samson, the Hero of the Hammer and Teresa's Chosen. Having lost his life in the Calamity, he revived at the Temple of Teresa in the capital the very same day, allowing him to relay the dire news of this disaster before the proverbial dust had settled. The investigation in question was also expedited thanks to the half-lion, half-eagle creatures known as griffins. Riding the house-sized winged beasts allowed the Spymaster's team to pass over the inhospitable and treacherous Sawblade Mountains. Not having to go around them or risk scaling them the hard way allowed the dispatched officials to arrive at their destination in a manner of days rather than weeks.

Unfortunately, the actual relief effort would have to take the long way around. Although mighty, swift, and of noble bearing, griffins were high-maintenance and relatively few in number. Using them to properly address the situation was not economically feasible due to the sheer amount of manpower and materials that needed to be transported. Just organizing the relief effort and compiling the necessary resources would take weeks, possibly even months. There was no guarantee the Empire would be able to

salvage the area, nor was there any way to tell how long it would take, even if they could.

In other words, the crown was unable to properly reassure the populace, causing unrest and fear to spread like wildfire throughout Cradle Valley.

“What if the wind spread that poisonous miasma around!” said some.

“What if some strange new illness appeared because of this?” questioned others.

“That place is cursed! The undead will rise in great numbers and spread throughout the land!” was a popular, but misinformed opinion.

As a result, over five thousand people had already migrated out of the province. The region’s total population of 55,000 had already fallen to just under 42,000 and was expected to get much lower. It was already at a stage where the lords and nobles had serious doubts the region would ever truly recover.

There were, however, those who profited immensely from this – namely adventurers in the 40 to 60 Level range. The city of Erosa that normally held about ten thousand residents at any given time had suddenly found itself bloated with hundreds upon hundreds of adventurers who came to profit off the event. After all, it wasn’t just the people that were looking to abandon this valley. All manner of monsters and wild animals had also begun pushing south and east, away from the Calamity’s epicentre. Bandits were also becoming an increasingly bigger problem, as hapless villagers who were either unable or unwilling to hire protection made for easy targets.

Under such circumstances, it was really no surprise that adventurers found themselves privy to an unnaturally large volume of Quests involving monster subjugation or working as armed escorts. And of course, overseeing all of this were all the various guilds that each individual belonged to. These privately owned organizations had the task of making sure all of their client’s requests were met in a timely manner and at competitive prices, while also keeping their members supplied with both equipment and information. They all stood to make solid profits with so much work going around, but the one that made the most money off other people’s suffering was, as usual, the Mercenary Guild.

Their office was a wooden two-story building on a busy road near the northern gate of Erosa. This organization had the rather unorthodox policy of running a bar and restaurant at all of its offices and often doubled as an inn. While other guilds also offered goods and services to their members, they focused on seemingly less frivolous things, like selling potions, crafting materials, weapons, armour, and reference materials.

However, this guild knew its members well. The stereotypical mercenary was a drifter, someone constantly on the road and with no roots of their own. Having a safe place where they could enjoy a warm meal, a cold drink, and a clean, soft bed was more than enough. And while they could get those things elsewhere, it was often accompanied by distrusting looks or busybodies poking their noses where they didn't belong. Such things didn't happen at the Mercenary Guild. The rooms they offered all had state-of-the-art locks and anti-eavesdropping wards, but most important of all, nobody asked any personal questions unless absolutely necessary.

This 'don't ask, don't tell' attitude was also why the restaurant on the ground floor was so quiet right now, despite there being over thirty people in it. While some of them were exchanging information and a few others were recruiting temporary teammates, the vast majority of them ate their breakfast and minded their own goddamned business. The most that could be heard was a soft murmur and the clanking of spoons and forks.

Creak

The wooden front door swung open slowly and an enormous figure, well over two metres tall, walked into the building. He wore a heavy black cloak that obscured most of his body and his face and hair were wrapped up in a dark blue cloth to make a makeshift mask that left only the area around his eyes exposed. What little could be seen of the skin on his face was pale and his irises were a piercing yellow colour that seemed to notice every little detail around him. The feet that poked out under the hem of his cloak wore a pair of sturdy-looking brown leather boots that were a size or two larger than your typical adventurer, much like the rest of him.

Just looking at his tall figure and wide shoulders made it obvious his body was well built. It was a physique well-suited to close combat Jobs that relied on muscle power and stamina, such as a Warrior, Berserker or Paladin. Well, his presence in this guild made it clear that last one wasn't

the case. Paladins were way too self-righteous to be caught dead in a place like this, and they knew nothing about subtlety – a far cry from this stranger.

He moved along the wooden floorboards without making any of the heavy footsteps one would expect from a man of his stature. He also carried himself with a sort of grace that made it clear he wasn't just some brawler. Indeed, his odd demeanour had allowed the more observant mercenaries gathered here to deduce he was of an agility-based Job, like a Ranger or Rogue, perhaps even one of His Majesty's Spies. The fact he was doing it seemingly unconsciously was a telltale sign that his Job Level was beyond 25, meaning he wasn't a rookie, either. It was also possible he had broken past Level 50, which would put him on equal footing with the other veteran mercenaries around.

The people in the guild all stared at the newcomer as he walked across the restaurant towards the bar at the far end of the hall.

"What, it's just him again?" said one of them dismissively under his breath.

The elf that had spoken up stopped gawking and resumed minding his own goddamned business. His breakfast, which consisted of a cup of tea, two grilled sausages, and a bowl of suspiciously chunky gruel, was far more important than some foreboding dark figure. Most of the others had much the same reaction and went about their morning routine. People like this stranger were surprisingly common among mercenaries, after all. Granted, the guy's size made him stand out more than usual, but this was hardly his first visit to this place. A few of the more observant regulars noticed he always seemed to come in during breakfast or dinner, yet never actually ordered any food. They could hardly blame him though, as the cheap meals on offer could hardly be called tasty.

The wrinkled old dwarf attending the bar wore a long-sleeved off-white tunic and slightly baggy dark grey pants, ending in a pair of town shoes that were beige in colour. He had a thick brown beard with streaks of silver in it and his head was almost completely bald. The barman/receptionist put away the glass he was pretending to clean and turned his attention to the newcomer.

“Ah, welcome back, Mister Morningwood,” he said in a strictly professional manner. Several people who overheard him giggled or snorted as they failed to suppress their laughter, but he ignored them. “I take it your Quest is complete?”

The tall figure opposite him nodded once as it sat down on one of the bar stools, though he still loomed over the standing dwarf. The bartender ducked under the counter momentarily and came back up holding an aquamarine-coloured crystal ball, about the size of a child’s head. It was set into a circular wooden base like a plaque or pedestal, though its function was to keep the thing from rolling around the place rather than show it off. He placed it on the counter, right in front of the other, much taller gentleman.

“Please go ahead,” said the dwarf.

Mister Morningwood nodded again and stretched out a hand from under his cloak. It was fittingly large and bandaged in such a way as to cover his palm and the back of his hand, leaving his thick pale fingers free to move about as they pleased. He placed his palm on top of the crystal like he was trying to grip it.

“Confirm Quest,” he chanted with a deep, clear voice and the ball flashed a few times in response.

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has completed a Quest: Slay 10 Murk Dwellers.]

Both men at the bar saw the same notification in their heads.

“Confirm Quest,” repeated the man without taking his hand off the crystal.

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has completed a Quest: Slay 5 Ogres.]

“Confirm Quest.”

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has completed a Quest: Deliver the Steel Ingots.]

“Confirm Quest.”

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has completed a Quest: Night Watch.]

“Very good, Mister Morningwood, I believe that’s everything,” said the aged dwarf behind the bar. “I will prepare your compensation immediately,” he added, then disappeared into a back room.

The receptionist would probably be a little while, so Boxxy decided to make use of its time and walked over to the Quest Board. It was a large wooden notice board that took up most of the wall to the right of the bar and had a large number of parchments stuck to it. Boxxy gave it a once-over, looking for any suitable work an enterprising young mimic could do in a day or two.

One would think this act would be an impossible thing for an illiterate monster like itself, but that wasn't really the case. It wasn't all that uncommon to find adventurers who could not read, especially among the type of ruffians and thugs that frequented the Mercenary Guild. Which was why the notices posted on its Quest Board were made with such individuals in mind.

Quest postings always bore a small stamp that denoted the type of objective. Monster subjugations and hunts were marked by a pair of red crossed swords, escorts were a blue shield, collection and gathering tasks had a green basket, and so on and so forth. The difficulty of each Quest was marked with an equally easy to understand star rating, and every mercenary worth their salt knew at least how to read numbers and do basic arithmetic. Otherwise they ran the risk of being scammed whenever money changed hands around them.

Unfortunately for Boxxy, it failed to spot anything tasty-looking. Killing other monsters, standing guard at the city gate or ferrying goods were the types of Quests it preferred since they were simple, straightforward, and required minimal conversation. However, none of those types of commissions were available. Most of the notices left on the board were related to escorting people, collecting ingredients, or other odd jobs.

Being an escort was out of the question. Boxxy had a tough enough time acting human without having to also babysit a number of them over a period of several days. It was more than that though. The thought of escorting people and protecting them was, simply put, ridiculous. That was literally like asking a starving wolf to shepherd a group of lambs.

Odd jobs were also out. Those also appeared to involve a level of personal interaction that the Mimic was not willing to undertake. Moreover, the ratio of time taken to gold earned was bad. In the end, the monster-cum-mercenary reached out and grabbed a parchment detailing a collection

Quest. Boxxy peeled the notice off the board with little resistance and placed it on the bar counter.

The receptionist returned a minute later with eight small pouches in his hands.

“Here are your deposits,” he said, setting four of them side-by-side, “and these four are your rewards. Would you like to confirm the amount?”

Boxxy nodded and reached out to feel the weight on each of them. The unmistakable clack of gold they made when shaken was like music to its fake ears. The monster-in-disguise used its magical perception to peek inside the pouches and make extra sure that the agreed upon amount was all there. The Mimic nodded its dummy head at the old dwarf and put away seven of the pouches under its heavy cloak. The last one, however, it placed on top of the parchment it took from the Quest Board earlier.

“Ah, another one?” exclaimed the bartender. He picked up the pouch and looked over the notice, then nodded. “As you wish, Mister Morningwood.”

He set the parchment back down on the bar and placed the crystal ball from before on top like it was a glorified paperweight. This was a magic tool known as a Quest Logger, which could be used to relay the contents of the parchments directly into the customer’s mind, regardless of their ability to read letters or words. The whole process of picking out and undertaking a new Quest was so streamlined and simplistic that even literate mercenaries sometimes skipped reading long-winded requests for themselves and brought them straight to the counter.

Boxxy wasn’t among their number though, so it honestly had no idea what this gathering request was actually about. Eager to find out, it placed a hand on top of the Quest Logger once again. The crystal ball glowed slightly and fed a stream of information into the Mimic’s mind.

Collect 120 KG of Bouncewood Bark
Description: Deliver 120 kilograms of Bouncewood Bark to the Mercenary Guild in the city of Erosa. Bouncewood trees may be found in the Troll Woods west of Erosa and are easily recognizable due to their smooth and black surface.
Difficulty: ★★
Time Limit: 4 days

Deposit: 100GP
Reward: 100GP
Progress: 0/120

Well, it certainly seemed simple enough. The pay wasn't all that great and there was no killing involved, but at least it didn't involve any human interaction. The four-day time limit was extremely generous, and the task itself would be quite easy if the difficulty rating was any indication. Two stars meant that an individual's primary Job had to be Level 25 to safely complete a Quest. Three stars would raise that bar to Level 50, and four to Level 75. One star, on the other hand, would mean any civilian could perform the task and was only used for mundane chores like cleaning or cooking.

It was worth keeping in mind that this rating signified the recommended power level an individual needed to *safely* complete a task. It was only a rough assessment meant to be taken as a guideline, as it was literally impossible for such a metric to be completely accurate all the time. Job, Skill, and gear compositions varied wildly, not only from one person to the next but also between adventuring parties.

For instance, it was entirely possible that a group of adventurers with an average Level of 30 could flawlessly complete a three-star Quest. Even a four-star one wasn't out of reach if they had excellent teamwork, equipment, and were prepared to suffer casualties. A five-star one was, however, nothing short of a suicide mission for that theoretical team. Whether they would be allowed to leave on that expedition depended entirely on the internal policies of the guild they belonged to.

As far as the Mercenary Guild was concerned, they allowed pretty much anyone to accept Quests from their Board, no questions asked.

However, such freedom came at a price in the shape of a mandatory deposit. It was a requirement unique to the Mercenary Guild wherein individuals would have to leave behind a certain amount of gold for every Quest they undertook, to serve as collateral. If the mercenary accomplished their task to a satisfying degree, they would get their deposit back in full in addition to the Quest's completion reward. Should they fail or disappear, never to be heard from again, then the guild would re-post the Quest and keep their deposit for themselves.

That way the guild either had a satisfied customer in the face of the one who posted the Quest, or they had a lump sum of gold with which to settle any damages or grievances that resulted from the failure of the Quest. Even if the Quest was technically complete they also had the authority to withhold part of the deposit should the client have viable complaints. Bottom line was that the Mercenary Guild would make a profit no matter what happened in the field.

There were, of course, a significant number of high-profile Quests that were not made available to outsiders. Non-members also did not have the backing of the Guild should things go awry with a client or the authorities. But such trifling matters were of little concern to Boxxy. The Mimic could get paid without having to subject itself to an Appraisal examination, and that was all that mattered.

“Accept Quest,” it chanted.

Both the crystal and the parchment glowed with a soft yellow light for several seconds. The tracking-type magic then enveloped Boxxy and a message appeared for both it and the receptionist.

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has undertaken a Quest: Collect 120 KG of Bouncewood Bark.]

“Will that be all?” asked the wrinkled old dwarf as he put away the crystal and the parchment behind the counter.

“No,” answered Boxxy. “Selling.”

Its arm reached out from under its cloak once more and placed something before the receptionist that looked like a rose flower made out of steel razors and wires. The dwarf picked it up carefully, making sure not to cut his fingers on the numerous sharp edges that jutted out from it.

“Identify.”

[Bladeblossom]

A disposable weapon made by a rookie Artificer. Pulling on the wire at the base of the Bladeblossom will trigger its mechanism, which launches a high number of spring-loaded blades in all directions. This particular item is of superior construction, allowing it to inflict exceptional damage despite being made out of common materials.

[Estimated Value: 24 GP]

Boxxy had placed three more of the things on the counter by the time the receptionist was finished appraising the first one. The dwarf quickly verified those as well, and then made an offer.

“Alright, I’ll buy all of them for 70 GP.”

The man-shaped monster on the other side of the counter simply nodded in response, as it did not possess the knowledge or people skills necessary to haggle. The dwarf then quickly produced the money and handed it over to complete the transaction. With its business concluded for the moment, the Mimic briskly walked out of the building without saying another word.

One of the human men who had been silently staring at the cloaked figure since it walked in went over to the bar and took a seat on the stool.

“Hey Grog, who was that?” he asked, a hint of worry in his voice.

“Mister Morningwood,” came the casual answer. “He showed up about a week ago and has been working hard ever since.”

“What do you think his deal is?”

“Don’t know. Don’t care. Though I do kinda like the guy, to be honest.”

“What, really?”

“Sure. He’s quiet, efficient and doesn’t try to haggle with me like the rest of you morons. He’s basically the ideal mercenary in my book.”

“Oh … Right. Yeah, you have a point. I don’t like him one bit, though.”

“Hah! What’s the matter, Torel? Jealous he’s been scooping up all the work?” the dwarf asked with a small chuckle.

“No! Well, a little – but that’s not what I’m talking about. Something about him just don’t feel right.”

“Okay, granted, the fellow is a bit creepy, but –”

“No, no, no, Grog. Not creepy. *Terrifying*. My hair stands on end whenever I’m in the same room with that guy.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking the same thing,” said his ginger-haired companion, sitting on the bar stool next to Torel. “There’s a thick stench of

death about him. Just looking his way makes some small part of me want to run for my life."

"Ah, you two are just imagining things. I mean sure he's got that 'mysteeeerious' and 'inteeeense' atmosphere about him, but he's no worse than most of the other part-timers I've seen. Besides, has he ever shown even the slightest sign of hostility?"

"No … I guess not," Torel admitted.

"Well, maybe he hasn't *shown* any hostility, but I definitely fucking *felt* it!" claimed the other human.

"Hah! Look at you!" Grog mocked. "You're actually scared of the big guy in the heavy cloak! You're way too green if you let superficial stuff like that get to you."

"But what if he's actually a criminal? Some mass murderer or psychopath!" Torel said.

The dwarf shrugged his shoulders in response.

"Ain't none of my business. Ain't none of the Mercenary Guild's business. And unless he does something to you, it ain't none of yours, either."

"Well … what if he has a huge bounty on his head!"

The dwarf stopped organizing his bar and sighed.

"Then it would be some bounty hunter's business. Look, lad, I like you, so let me offer you some advice on the house: Do *not* mess with that part-timer."

"…"

Torel briefly considered the elderly bartender's words. The dwarf was right, of course. There was no legal profit to be made from poking one's nose into some suspicious individual's private matters. Yet some part of him didn't let him put this matter out of his mind.

"And just so we're clear," added the bartender, "neither me nor my bosses are gonna be responsible if someone finds you dead in an alley, alright?"

"Y-yeah, okay. You've made your point. I'll stay out of his way."

The bartender's last few words struck a nerve with Torel. Not because he was afraid that scenario would happen. Just the opposite, actually.

His intuition told him they wouldn't find him at all should he make an enemy of this 'Mister Morningwood.'

Part Two

Boxxy walked through the streets of Erosa with purpose. The new Quest it picked up required a visit to the dense forest that was visible on the horizon beyond the city's walls. But that could wait. It had more pressing matters to attend to. As it continued along the relatively crowded streets, however, it yet again noticed an oddity that was pretty much a pattern by that point. Humans were shying away from it, giving its tall, cloaked figure a wide berth. At first it thought that was just the natural reaction to meeting a towering, dark, and masked stranger but was growing convinced that wasn't the case.

Mostly because it was only the *humans* that reacted this way. Dwarves, elves, and even the rare beastkin or lizard-man all showed much more subdued reactions. They also got out of its way while it walked around town, but that was mostly to avoid bumping into it. The humans practically leapt out of its way with looks of anxiety or even outright fear on their faces. Some even went so far as to let out a yelp and run away whenever they realised the towering stranger had snuck up on them.

It wasn't just pedestrians, either. Human merchants also seemed unwilling to do business with it, and a few outright denied service. And while non-human businesses treated it with a certain amount of suspicion, that was immediately dispelled when the gold was brought out.

Boxxy had no idea why any of this was happening, but it didn't like it one bit. Many of its victims had made the same sort of expressions and reactions, so having others act this way when it was supposed to be hiding its true identity was quite untasty. As a mimic, Boxxy's instincts told it to hide in plain sight and wait for its prey to draw close before it struck. Walking around in the open with so many pairs of eyes following its clearly conspicuous form was the exact opposite of that, making it a nerve-wracking experience.

Having its cover blown and being targeted by more guards and adventurers than the monster could count was something Boxxy wanted to avoid at all costs. However, there was no other way it could accomplish all the things it wanted to do, so it accepted these public appearances as a necessary risk. Thankfully, it reached its next destination without much incident. It stood in front of a small two-story building on the busy market street. The sign above the solid wooden door read 'Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets.' There was a large glass window to the left of said door that was too dirty for anything but traces of sunlight to pass through. Boxxy pushed the door open with a pale hand and went inside.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

The interior of the shop was not too different from the general store Boxxy had visited several times before. Immediately to the right of the entrance was a mostly bare beige wall that had little going for it other than a random picture of what looked like an orange tabby cat. There was a wooden L-shaped counter to its front and left, with several shelves filled with various contraptions and mechanical gizmos behind it. The window was worthless as a light source, though that wasn't a problem due to the bright lamp hanging from the ceiling. A half-open door was visible in the far left corner from where the Mimic was standing, allowing weird grinding and whirring noises to spill in from the workshop beyond it.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

Boxxy closed the front door behind it, causing the door frame to ring the little bell overhead for the second time. It immediately felt a pang of relief wash over it. Being indoors was a lot more comfortable than having to deal with the hundreds of prying eyes outside. It didn't feel quite right being inside a building though, so it was perhaps more accurate to say that its new environment was simply 'less uncomfortable.'

"Just a minute!" came a slightly squeaky voice from farther inside the shop.

The door in the corner opened up all the way and a creature about the height and build of a nine-year-old human girl walked out from within. She had a cute face with pink hair tied in twin pigtails. A pair of huge, leather-bound safety goggles covered her large green eyes. Black splotches of oil stained

her brown overalls, grey work shirt, and heavy leather gloves. In her right hand, she clutched a well-used steel wrench covered with scratches.

This was Cornie Fizzlesprocket, an Artificer and current owner of Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets. Though she looked like a child, she was already a woman in her early twenties. Her small stature and somewhat awkward proportions were due to the fact that she was a gnome. Though her people were nowhere near as strong as humans due to the difference in height and mass, they more than made up for it in quick wits, sharp eyes, and nimble fingers.

"Oh! If it isn't Boxxy!" she exclaimed as she lifted the goggles from her eyes.

The Mimic returned the greeting with a nod, which seemed to be a satisfactory response.

"Alright, gimme a sec to clean up," she added while she disappeared beyond the back door.

As for the monster in her midst, it was still somewhat amazed by how easy it was to get by just by nodding and gesturing. It wasn't like it couldn't speak, but it really needed to work on its communication skills when it came to talking with actual people. The last time it tried to hold an actual conversation it almost got arrested for asking a street vendor if she was tasty. It had no idea what this 'sexual harassment' thing she kept yelling about was, but it was made abundantly clear it needed to avoid speaking as much as possible.

Fizzy returned from the back after a minute. She had changed out of her filthy clothes, and now wore an off-white tank top, brown work pants, and a fresh pair of gloves. She had also made an attempt at wiping her face, but there was still a small black smudge on her cheek. She walked up to the counter and climbed on top of a small crate so that her entire upper body was visible above it. Her customer, on the other hand, sat cross-legged on the floor in front of her, putting the two of them on relatively equal eye level.

"So, what can I do for you, big guy?" asked the peppy gnome.

"Need more lessons and materials," came the curt reply.

“What, already? Are you sure you properly practised what I taught you last time?”

The Mimic nodded and reached into its cloak, taking out a Bladeblossom identical to the ones it sold earlier and placing it on the countertop. Fizzy reached over and carefully picked it up as she pulled a small screwdriver out of her tool belt. She then began inspecting Boxxy’s handiwork.

“Not bad,” she commented, rolling the device around in her fingers and poking at it with her screwdriver. “Triggering mechanism is put together well, springs are coiled properly, and the blades won’t clash into each other when activated.”

She kept commenting on the device’s construction while taking it apart with practised ease. Once she was done, she gingerly set the partially disassembled Bladeblossom down on the counter and put away her screwdriver.

“You did a great job on the overall assembly,” was her verdict. “Frankly, it’s kind of amazing you can do detailed work like this with those sausage-like fingers of yours ... er, no offence.”

The Mimic waved its hand dismissively, which the gnome took to understand as ‘don’t mind the small stuff.’

“Size aside though, you have some serious talent for this stuff,” she continued. “I only taught you how to make these three days ago and you’re already this good. You should be past Level 2 of the Job by now, right?”

Boxxy nodded in response. The two then sort of stared at each other in silence for several seconds before Fizzy remembered how bad of a conversationalist her latest student was.

“So, er, what Level is your Artificer Job now?”

It was odd that she had to specifically ask all these rather obvious questions, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Doing exactly what one was told was vital for a rookie Artificer. Getting unnecessarily creative or omitting certain steps was how accidents happened in the workshop.

“Four.”

The gnome blinked her huge eyes a few times, then smiled up at her student. “Hmm? I’m sorry, I think I misheard that. Could you repeat yourself?”

“Job is Level 4.”

“Holy – *Four?* But you only started a week ago!”

The cloaked figure tilted its masked head to show it didn’t quite understand. “So?”

“So? *SO?* It takes most people a month of practice to get their basics up to that Level! Just how many – wait, didn’t you say something about materials? Did you already use up all the parts you bought last time?”

She got another nod in response.

“B-b-b-but there were enough bits in that toolbox you bought to make a hundred of these!”

Making so many and in such a short amount of time was a significant feat, but it wasn’t just about the apparent speed of the assembly. If Fizzy’s newest pupil really did progress that quickly, then almost all of those spring-loaded traps were as well-built as the sample she had just examined. Meaning that the guy in front of her not only worked fast but did so without sacrificing quality. Granted, the gnome herself could easily do the same, but a total rookie pulling that off felt like cheating.

“Show me how you put one of these together!” she demanded.

“No.”

Boxxy didn’t want to demonstrate it for her since that would mean revealing it was a shapeshifter. If this truth got out, then it would no longer be able to stay in town and take advantage of the various goods and services that only civilization could provide. So if Fizzy were to somehow catch wind of it, she would have to be … dealt with.

The persistent gnome, however, wouldn’t give up so easily. “Come on! I’m super curious!”

“No.”

“Pretty please?”

“No.”

“I swear I won’t spill your secret!”

The Mimic hesitated for a brief moment. If this little thing could keep its secret, then surely it would be okay.

However, it then remembered Xera’s helpful hint for blending into civilized society.

Everybody lies.

“No,” it repeated, though it did little to discourage the increasingly petulant gnome.

“I have to know! I *need* to know!”

She slammed her tiny fists onto the counter with more force than one would expect from a small woman like her. It actually shook the wooden counter, causing the Bladeblossom to rattle and clatter against its surface.

Click

“…”

There was the briefest moment of silence before Fizzy and Boxxy hit the deck as fast they could.

SHKRA-PRING

Forty tiny blades shot out from the steel rose-looking contraption in all directions. Some stuck into the ceiling, others into the wall, a couple cracked the window and a number of them hit the various metal bits and pieces strewn about the shop.

“YEOOW!” screamed Fizzy. One piece of shrapnel had ricocheted off something and stabbed her in the back of the arm, which started bleeding profusely.

“Son of a bitch, that hurt!” The realisation that there was another person in the shop dawned on her in the next instant. “Oh no – Boxxy!” The thought that her carelessness might have killed or seriously injured someone sent her practically flying up to the counter to check on her customer.

“Hey! Are you … oh … kay?”

The tiny gnome had lucked out and was only hit once, but her towering customer had not been as lucky. Boxxy's massive stature had prevented it from ducking out of the way in time, causing it to get hit by two blades – one in the forehead and another in the eye. It casually stood and reached a pale hand up to the foreign objects, pulling them out without uttering so much as a peep.

"What … are you?" mumbled the dumbfounded gnome.

That was when she noticed the viscous yellow blood oozing from the wounds. The gnome's already large eyes became the size of dinner plates. Even if she had never been in a fight, she still knew that only monsters had disgusting blood like that.

"GUA-Hrmhp!"

She tried to call for help but was silenced when Boxxy lunged forward over the counter and put a hand over her mouth. The flesh of its palm and fingers swiftly reformed into an airtight gag that kept the gnome from mustering anything other than a muffled scream while also making it hard to breathe. She struggled, kicked, and clawed at the monstrous appendage as tears welled up in her eyes, but she was unable to so much as budge her assailant's grip.

The Mimic climbed over the counter and got closer to its thrashing captive. A fleshy tendril shot out from under its cloak and picked up a length of rope that was nearby. This was quickly wrapped around the tiny prisoner, binding her hands and feet together.

"MMmmf! Fmmph!"

Fizzy watched in abject horror as her freedom was robbed from her. The monster in front of her produced some cloth scraps and lodged them in her mouth and throat, forming a less terrifying – though no less effective – gag. It then casually carried her into the back room, far away from any prying eyes.

This room was about the size of the storefront and was, quite frankly, a mess. A tiny table had been turned into a workstation on the right, and a plethora of tools lined the wall around it. Numerous crates and boxes filled with various parts and pieces were strewn about haphazardly. A small hearth and anvil were in the far right corner of the room, the place where

the shop's owner forged any custom parts she couldn't acquire for herself. A pile of iron, copper, bronze and other common metal ingots lay next to it, and a rack with special alchemical solutions was hung up on the wall. The far left corner had a set of stairs leading up to the gnome's bedroom, and between it and the door were a line of cabinets stuffed with failed inventions, ruined prototypes, broken contraptions, and other random scrap.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

"Hey! Are you alright in here?"

A ringing noise and a man's voice came from the storefront at almost the same time. It appeared someone had noticed the commotion and stepped inside to check. The ginger-haired young man saw the devastation caused by the Bladeblossom as well as what looked like bloodstains on the counter, but didn't see a person, living or otherwise.

"Oh, merciful Teresa!" he exclaimed. "Hello? Is anyone hurt!"

A pink-haired female gnome leaned out from behind the door in the back. Only her large head and upper body were visible.

"Yes, hello!" she yelled back with an oddly chipper voice.

"What happened here?" he asked, gesturing at the walls and ceiling.

"Accident."

"I see blood! Was anyone hurt?"

"Nothing serious."

The young man thought something was off about the gnome's tone of voice, and her attitude was a little bit suspect. She was way too happy considering her shop was just wrecked. And that thumbs up she gave was a little *too* enthusiastic. There was also the weird sense of dread the young man felt when he looked into her large yellow eyes. He couldn't put his mind at ease, no matter how much he tried.

" … You sure you're not hurt? There's blood and … is that mustard sauce?"

"I am fine. Drank healing potion."

"I see. That's good to hear."

If the person herself insisted she was okay, then he would have to take her word for it. Even if this was his first time in here, this place was known for for being the only gnome-run store in town. That was how he knew that even though that pink-haired girl looked like a little kid, she was an adult who was more than capable of taking care of herself.

“Sorry for intruding,” he apologized. “I’ll be going then.”

“Bye ~♪!”

“Ah, yes … goodbye … ”

Well, that response was definitely weird. The young man concluded that the rumours he heard about all gnomes having a few screws loose weren’t entirely fictitious. He decided to leave the store and go about his day, trying his best to put the incident out of his mind.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

After making sure nobody else was coming to investigate, the imitation Fizzy hid itself from view, slamming the door to the back closed. As for the actual Fizzy, she was in a state where she earnestly hoped she’d gone mad. A myriad of scenarios had played out in her head when she was bound, gagged, and dragged into her own back room by what appeared to be a male stranger, but none of them were even close to *this*.

What had resembled a man who stood over two metres tall was revealed to be a monstrous chest roughly forty-by-fifty-by-ninety centimetres in size. It had grown legs on its left side, a head on the right, and arms and shoulders from its top and bottom, near the head. The resulting figure was unquestionably humanoid, although the chest-shaped torso was extremely unsettling. Then again, that was probably why the monster wore that heavy cloak and baggy clothes. They did a very good job of obscuring its more rectangular features.

At least until it heard that nosy do-gooder calling out into the shop. The monster had abandoned its guise the instant it heard the bell at the entrance and reverted back to a monstrous treasure chest with eight freakish spider legs sticking out from its bottom. Its lid opened up to reveal two rows of terrifying, jagged and misaligned teeth. A massive red tongue then stretched out of its maw, licking the bound and gagged gnome across the face and hair three times. She struggled pointlessly against her bindings and rivers of

tears flooded out of her eyes – a natural reaction, considering it was obvious she was about to be eaten.

Fizzy realised she was mistaken about Boxxy's intentions when she saw a near-perfect replica of her own face emerge out of its flesh-red tongue. It was like looking into a mirror, if not for the overtly silly grin and unnaturally yellow eyes. The rest of the moist appendage transformed into her upper body and was rapidly dressed in the oily clothing she had discarded earlier. The Mimic then poked the resulting meat puppet through the door and convinced the gnome's last and only hope of being rescued to leave. Once that was done, the monster reeled in all its freakish appendages, sat down in front of her and then ... just waited.

Fizzy hyperventilated. Her throat never stopped trying to scream, and her eyes didn't even dare to blink. Right now, she felt more terrified than she had ever been before. Not because there was a monster in front of her. Well, there was that, but her biggest fear arose from how … *ordinary* it looked.

She was quite aware of what a mimic was and had little doubt the creature in front of her was one of those. And yet, it didn't look out of place. A random wooden chest lying around haphazardly in the middle of her workshop where it would undoubtedly get in the way was bound to be an eyesore. Yet it seemed like this chest had always been there.

A *monster* was sitting right *in front of her*, and yet some part of her *didn't find that odd*. It was this freakish sense of familiarity that somehow plunged her to new levels of despair. Upon making this realisation, the gnome desperately wished she truly had gone insane. At least then she could dismiss this experience as an extremely vivid hallucination.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

The bell at the front door rang, bringing her out of the depths of despair she was sinking into.

Ring-a-ding-ding-ding

The door slammed shut and a set of footsteps could be heard on the wooden floor. With renewed vigour, Fizzy struggled and tried to scream, desperate for something – anything – to save her from this living nightmare. The footsteps drew closer and the door to her workshop creaked open.

A woman dressed in a nun's habit walked in like she owned the place.

"Mmph! Hrlf mmfff!"

Fizzy tried to warn the stranger, but the nun only glanced at her with a sort of cold contempt. Then she looked towards the chest, then back to the gnome, then at the chest again.

"Really now," she said in a clearly displeased tone. "You need to be more careful, Master. This is the third time already!"

"…"

The gnomish tinkerer went still and quiet for the first time since she'd been bound and gagged.

"Of course I can fix it, but this can't keep happening. There are only so many times I can wipe her memory before her brain turns to mush."

"…"

The nun walked over to the captive woman and placed a slender hand on her head.

"Mmmmph! MMMMPH!"

The gnome started struggling valiantly once more, but try as she might, there was no escape for her. Not only for her current predicament but also for the days, weeks, possibly even months to come. This was the consequence of someone skilled and naive catching the interest of one who barely knew what compassion, mercy, or kindness even meant.

"Sleep," chanted the nun.

Fizzy's consciousness began to slip away from her. She instinctively tried to stay awake, but her world turned dark all the same. The next thing she knew, she was screaming at the top of her lungs and climbing over the counter.

"Hey, Boxxy! Are you okay?"

"Fine," said the towering adventurer.

The gnome looked him over frantically and was relieved to see her visitor hadn't been injured in that unfortunate accident just moments ago.

“Oh, thank god! I’m really sorry about that! I don’t know what came over me! An Artificer of my Level setting off a Bladeblossom like that – it’s inexcusable!”

“It’s okay.”

“No, I insist I make it up to you!”

“Then teach me.”

“You’re sure? Even after what I did?”

Boxxy nodded. This girl was still the best (and only) Artificer trainer in town. She was the one who had taught the Mimic the gadget-focused Job in the first place.

“I still feel terrible, though … I know! How about I give you a few lessons free of charge? Let me do at least that much.”

The disguised monster gave her another nod, this one accompanied by a thumbs up.

“Alright!” she exclaimed, her voice full of vigour. “I’ll make sure to teach you everything I know! I won’t go so easy on you now that you’ve shown your talent, though, so you better get ready for a crash course like no other!”

Boxxy gave the strangely pumped-up Fizzy another affirmative gesture. The gnome turned around and headed towards her workshop in the back, but paused for a moment when she reached the door.

“Huh? That’s weird …”

The shut door.

The one she never fully closed because she couldn’t hear the bell at the entrance if she did that.

“Well, whatever,” she said dismissively and waved her guest over. “Right this way, Boxxy. It’s time to see how well you handle blast powder.”

Part Three

The front door to Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets opened up with a ring and a humongous cloaked man exited the store carrying a large hemp bag. By the sun's position, it was late afternoon, maybe two or three hours from sunset.

The Mimic and the gnome had spent most of the day inside Fizzy's workshop as the hyperactive little mechanic eagerly showed off her skill at tinkering and construction. As expected of a Level 56 Artificer, her dexterity and precision were the real deal, and Boxxy eagerly soaked up all the tips and tricks she shared. It also closely observed her well-trained hand

movements with its magical perception and made sure to memorize them so it could replicate them later.

The disguised monster surveyed the street. Foot traffic had died down quite a bit while it was inside, which was both good and bad. Good, because it meant fewer eyes would be on its conspicuous form, and bad because its stupidly tall form stood out like a sore thumb and was even more noticeable from a distance. Deciding it didn't want to spend any more time exposed like this, it hoisted the bag onto its shoulder and trudged off towards its 'home base.'

This bag was filled with yet more toolboxes and parts it purchased from Fizzy. The reason it had to carry the items around like this instead of sticking them its Storage was that it had to open its maw in order to fit the large container in its pocket dimension. While it could discretely deposit and withdraw small objects like a Bladeblossom or a satchel of gold, no amount of sleight of hand would let the Mimic do that with those bulky metal boxes.

As for the cost of its new purchases, it came out to a whopping 1,170 GP. A naturally greedy creature like Boxxy severely disliked parting with that much shiny gold at once, but it was for the sake of advancing its Artificer Job, so it couldn't be helped. That money was essentially a form of investment, as the monster stood a very good chance of securing a profit.

Most Artificer-made devices were difficult to put together since they required specialized parts, tools, and know-how, but the final product was extremely simple to use. As a side effect, the value of such gizmos would go up immensely when compared to the cost of the raw materials to make them.

A good example of this was the one hundred Bladeblossom kits the Mimic had purchased three days ago. The raw materials to produce all those spring-loaded single-use devices only cost Fizzy about 150 GP. She had then used her workshop to transform the metal ingots into tiny blades, springs, wires and other necessary parts. The finished components were sold to Boxxy at a total price of 650 GP, which consisted of 50 GP worth of tools and 600 GP worth of parts. Even then, a single well-made Bladeblossom from Boxxy could be sold at 15 GP. So it was theoretically

possible for the Mimic to make almost three times as much gold as it had spent on the parts.

Unfortunately, reality wasn't anywhere near as rosy as such wishful thinking.

Of the first thirty devices that Boxxy made, twelve were complete failures, fourteen were of poor quality and only the remaining four were of standard quality. And while the next seventy were at least of middling value, only twenty or so of them were as good as the ones it sold at the Mercenary Guild.

Whether there was anyone around willing to buy a hundred Bladeblossoms was a different question altogether, though it wasn't something Boxxy even considered. In fact, it had already set off a number of the things for testing purposes and put a bunch of them aside for later use. Once its supply of raw parts was exhausted, it began taking them apart and putting them back together in order to acquire more Artificer XP.

This new endeavour worked well, but it came at a price since not all of the components could be safely extracted from a finished Bladeblossom. The petal-shaped razors were mostly fine, but the more delicate internal parts got dented or broken from the repeated strain and were quickly rendered unusable.

Boxxy assembled a total of 170 Bladeblossoms before it decided to stop. At present, it only had fifteen or so well-crafted ones and six crappier ones. It was no longer in a position to recoup its losses even if it were to sell all of those, but that was fine. The main purpose of spending its gold to increase its Artificer Level was already accomplished.

Besides, all the money spent on this endeavour would eventually come back to it since it was an *investment*. Which in Mimicanese meant that when Boxxy was done with this city, it would kill the gnome, absorb her body, steal all her money, take every single ingot, spring, sprocket and nail in her workshop, and then have Xera burn down her house for good measure. That way it would be able to get all of its assets back and then some.

Boxxy was, however, completely oblivious to the fact that Fizzy had already used a large chunk of said assets to settle outstanding debts. She'd also had to set some aside to pay taxes and purchase necessities like food,

tools, and raw materials. Her pockets were therefore no more full than when the Mimic entered her life, but at least she had some semblance of peace of mind.

As for the blissfully ignorant shapeshifter, it walked through the city streets in the vague direction of the southern gate for about half an hour. At one point it went off the main road and into a less populated side street, then proceeded through a series of increasingly dingier alleyways until it reached an old, run-down stone and wood building in the middle of the slums. This place was likely a warehouse at some point, considering how large and spacious it was.

Boxxy went inside through what was once the building's loading entrance. Rotting boxes, bits of rubble, glass shards, a couple of wrecked carriages and other useless junk was lying strewn about the place. It was also once home to a small community of sixteen wretched vagrants. They were so pitiful that the only successful Cadaver Absorption they yielded was just two points of Endurance (END). Merely a drop in the lake that was the Mimic's HP at this point.

The monster in question proceeded towards a doorway that led farther to the back. This appeared to have once been an office at some point; the old desk, wooden cabinet, broken chairs, and old, musty bookshelves the Mimic found when it first entered the place suggested as much. All that garbage had been thrown out since then, though. The room was now completely empty except for two dead bodies on the floor, a rusty iron trunk in the corner, and a red-skinned, four-armed demon sitting on top of it with a bored expression.

"Oh, hey boss," said Kora when she noticed her master approach.

She got up from her improvised chair and stretched her stiff body with a yawn. The gigantic fiend towering over even Boxxy's current form was deemed way too conspicuous to accompany it around town. So she was ordered to guard the place and keep out of sight. Well, the former was hardly necessary. The run-down old building held no significance to the Mimic other than being a quiet spot where it could focus on its work.

"We heading out soon?"

“After sunset,” Boxxy said, setting down the heavy bag it was carrying around.

Now that it was away from prying eyes, the Mimic quickly undid its human-like transformation and assumed its favourite spider-chest form. Having to keep its real body tilted on its side all day while masquerading as a person was considerably uncomfortable and slightly disorienting. It had gotten used to it over the last week, but it much preferred its spider legs after all.

“What’s all this?” asked Kora, pointing at the sack.

“Parts. What about the intruders you mentioned?”

“Hm? Ah yeah. Just some pathetically weak bums. One of them keeled over the instant he saw me. No fun at all.”

The fiend pouted slightly to indicate her displeasure, but her master completely ignored her and skittered over to the bodies. It hadn’t gotten a chance to eat anything worthwhile all day, so it wasted no more time fulfilling that basic need.

CRUNCH MUNCH MUNCH MUNCH

The dead men were thus quickly devoured and any blood stains were instantly licked up out of habit. These pathetic weaklings were better utilized as food rather than trying to absorb them. Even then, they were mostly skin and bones and wouldn’t be nearly enough to satiate Boxxy’s monstrous hunger, but they would at least keep its belly from rumbling for the moment.

The Mimic then went back to the sack it brought in and opened it. Three metal toolboxes were retrieved from the inside: a grey one, a red one, and a blue one. They were approximately thirty centimetres wide, while their length and height were just over half that. The containers looked like miniature chests, which the Mimic found to be oddly endearing ... maybe even a little bit cute. It put the red and blue ones inside its Storage and opened up the grey one using two of its spider legs as elongated fingers. A number of smaller boxes and compartments lined the inside, each holding a number of metallic bits necessary for hand-held Artificer devices.

“Oh!” exclaimed Kora. “You’re building stuff again, huh? Can I watch?”

“Okay.”

Boxxy sat firmly on the ground and narrowed its focus. Its eight arachnid limbs were not retracted inside its body, however, but bent forward towards the toolbox. The four at the very front had their pointed tips split in two as if they were organic tweezers with chitin-like tips. The Mimic then applied its recently acquired Metal Mimicry Skill to the other four. Pliable flesh transformed into actual solid steel, as opposed to merely an imitation of it, forming an array of tools in the process. More specifically a hammer, a pair of wire cutters, and two screwdrivers.

Two of the tweezer-like fingers each grabbed a part from the toolbox and held them in place while two of the tool-tipped limbs put them together. The other set of tools and pincers did the same, then the first repeated their action. The eight stick-like limbs began moving about frantically, gradually picking up in speed, though hardly at the expense of precision. In a way, the practised movements made the whole thing look too easy. It was almost as if the monster was simply throwing the bits into a pile that miraculously assembled itself into something new all on its own.

This spectacle was nothing special from the Mimic’s point of view though. It was just employing a combination of its magical perception, muscle memory, and DEX Attribute to make sure everything went exactly where it needed to be. That was why it barely showed a reaction when it accomplished its task in seemingly no time flat.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Great quality.]

“Heh, that’s neat,” commented Kora.

By now, her boredom from standing guard all day had gone away. The fiend found watching her master work to be surprisingly fun. Even if she had no idea what was going on, it was hard to deny that seeing something assembled before her very eyes at high speeds was quite entertaining. She would, of course, much prefer to go on a murder spree with a healthy dose of rape, but beggars couldn’t be choosers.

As for the Mimic, it had already moved on to the next item. It had learned quite a few things from Fizzy’s day-long crash course, so it was eager to become a Level 5 Artificer in order to put that knowledge to use. Its Job

Level was very close to that threshold, but it still needed to make ten or so more of these relatively basic contraptions before it reached that goal.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Superior quality.]

Just like Fizzy had informed it at the beginning, this Job increased in Level much slower than what the Mimic was used to. The reason was that, instead of being a Monster Job like Mimic or a Caster such as Warlock, the Artificer Job was of the Artisan archetype. This meant that one had to repeatedly manufacture related items or perform relevant services in order to gain XP. It was impossible to grow as an Artificer just by killing things, regardless of whether the monster used those Bladeblossoms in combat or not.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Standard quality.]

Well, it made sense in a way. It wasn't like a villager would become a better farmer if he went about hitting people over the head with his radishes. He had to work the fields, care for livestock, and churn butter. Blacksmiths had to make, maintain, and improve weapons and armour and Cooks had to make lots of delicious food. What happened with said items or whether anyone would eat that food did not matter as far as the Job was concerned. And an Artificer was no different.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Great quality.]

Therefore, raising a Production Job was a naturally slow, arduous process. The only upside was that the relative speed of progress stayed mostly constant as it got further along. In other words, it took roughly the same amount of time to get from Level 1 to Level 5 as it did to get from Level 50 to Level 55. However, that was only under the condition that one had the right materials and sufficiently advanced schematics to keep pushing their limits.

The relatively simplistic Bladeblossoms, for example, would stop providing XP once Boxxy's Artificer Job hit Level 5, and it would need to move onto something more challenging. Much like how combat-oriented Jobs would not grow properly if one only fought the same type of low-Level enemy, Artisan Jobs required their own set of Level-appropriate challenges in order to improve. It wouldn't be called 'progression' if one endlessly ran in place, after all.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Great quality.]

Well, this particular individual's monstrous crafting speed was the main reason it had advanced much faster than Cornie Fizzlesprocket anticipated. The gnome assumed her student was a human, which was why she freaked out at its growth earlier. While it wasn't exactly unheard of for geniuses in certain fields to appear from time to time, seeing one right before her very eyes was something she never thought would happen. In fact, her initial assumption had been that it was far more likely her student progressed so fast because he cheated.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Superior quality.]

Which wasn't far from the truth, considering Boxxy's multiple tooled limbs, its extremely accurate three-dimensional magical perception, and impressive DEX Attribute score. It could assemble a Bladeblossom in under three minutes, which was three or four times faster than what its gnomish teacher was capable of. A regular beginner, on the other hand, would probably take over an hour of slow, meticulous work to make a single one. And even then, whether it would actually result in a satisfactory product was highly questionable.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Standard quality.]

Physical capabilities were hardly the entire reason for this level of efficiency, however. It was also a matter of the Mimic's mindset. It equated the work of Artificers to be shapeshifting applied to an object. Both practices boiled down to combining basic elements into something that was greater than the sum of its parts. The only difference from the Mimic's point of view was that one used flesh and bone while the other relied on springs and sprockets.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Great quality.]

In truth, Boxxy found the act of assembly was actually much, much simpler than shapeshifting its body around. Growing a working human eyeball for the first time or creating an organic wheel from scratch was, objectively speaking, already far more complex than something straightforward like a spring-loaded blade dispenser. And once it had gotten used to the creation process, its naturally adept muscle memory could reconstruct its creations with ease. Even the organic wheels took less than two seconds to form by

now, thanks to all the practice it put into them. Thus, assembling a contraption of this small scale and basic function was a trifling task at best. Another thing that spoke volumes of its ability was that its creations were of a higher quality than normal.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Standard quality.]

Well, most of the time anyway. It was only natural that handmade items would come out with some variations between them. An errant twitch from the craftsman, some misstep in the timing, or an unseen flaw in the components and materials could all cause the quality to deteriorate. Conversely, performing the right motions with high-grade materials would result in a fittingly superior product.

Fizzy was, to her credit, an adept craftsman, so Boxxy rarely came across a situation where it was let down by faulty parts. It wasn't experienced enough to tell when such a thing happened, but it understood that, statistically speaking, it must have happened several times so far. It saw no other reason why its creations would drift between the Standard and Great quality ratings. It was definitely showing improvement though, as evidenced by how it would get a Superior quality Bladeblossom every now and then.

[You have created a Bladeblossom of Poor quality.]

The opposite outcome was also possible though. The Mimic had tried to make one a bit quicker than normal, which resulted in its product being given the second-lowest quality rating. At the very least it wasn't the dreaded Unusable, as items of this absolute bottom rank were unsalvageable trash. In fact, according to Fizzy, Unusable items were so bad it was safer to bury them in a ditch instead of trying to use them in combat. Her words of warning went double for Artificer-made goods, as those had a habit of backfiring if mishandled.

This was all very informative to Boxxy, as the simple creature had no idea what any of those terms meant, nor how many 'tiers' of this stuff existed. It vaguely understood that Superior was better than Great, which was, in turn, better than Standard and so on, but that was the gist of it. As a monster that was predisposed to relying on its natural gifts rather than crafted equipment, it had some difficulty grasping the concept of gear quality.

The world would honestly be much easier to understand if everything was graded on tastiness and shininess instead.

“I have returned,” reported Xera as she walked into the old office.

Boxxy was working on its tenth creation of the afternoon when its other familiar reappeared. The succubus was still disguised as a nun in service so Teresa, the Goddess of Justice and Truth whose religious symbolism revolved around hammers. The delicious irony of that form was the main reason she chose to use it. The secondary reason was that it enticed her demonic co-contractor to perform far more brutal acts upon her person during their intimate sessions. The tertiary (and objectively legitimate) incentive was that people treated her with less suspicion and more respect than they normally would have.

“Oh, hey cum-bucket,” said Kora when she saw the succubus arrive.

“Hey. What’s our master doing?” asked Xera, pointing at Boxxy.

“The boss is building more of those metal flowers.”

“Oh? Lemme see.”

The false nun got closer to the Mimic and looked curiously at its tooled limbs as they swished around in a blur. It was the first time she’d bothered to get a proper look at the process, and she had to admit it looked pretty impressive.

“Heh, that’s neat,” Xera commented with a bemused smile.

“I know, right?”

“Hmm …. I really hope it finishes its business with the gnome soon, though. My Dreamweaver Skill is bound to mess something up if I have to keep using it on the same target.”

Best case scenario, the gnome would become a complete amnesiac or fall into a coma. Worst case scenario, all the memories that were locked away would come crashing back and the monstrous trio’s cover would be blown wide open.

“What’s that gnome like, anyway? Haven’t seen anything but dark alleys and homeless bums for the past week.”

“She looks like a little kid, with a large head and pink pigtails.”

“A kid, huh? How tall are we talking?”

“About … this big.”

The succubus used her hand to indicate the gnome only went up to about her midsection, just below the breasts. The difference between the two was almost as extreme as the difference between Xera and Kora.

“Hmm … Say, do you think if I stuck my dick in all the way it would come out of her throat?”

“ … That’s not how anatomy works, you moron.”

“It isn’t?”

“Of course not. Mortals have all those mushy organs in their torsos, remember? Spleens, hearts, stomachs, livers –”

“Stop that, you’re making me hungry,” Boxxy called out before returning to its tinkering.

“Oh, yeah. Those,” said Kora, stroking her chin in thought. “I can just push past those with enough force though, right?”

“Whuh?” Xera blurted. “But – Oh! I see. Well, um, hnnn, I guess that could work.”

“You just got turned on at the thought of being speared all the way through by a massive dick, didn’t you?”

“No! … Well, maybe a little.”

Kora raised an eyebrow. “Uh-huh?”

“Okay, a lot.”

“You really want to be dicked to death, huh?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe. You really should look into growing a bigger –”

“I said be quiet!” the Mimic mind-shouted, causing both demons to shut up.

Their constant prattling was easy to ignore normally, but what Boxxy needed to do right now was concentrate, and listening to those two flirting was really not helping in that regard. Having no other choice in the matter,

the two demons decided to settle down and observe the monster's handiwork.

[You have created a Bladeblossom.]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 5 Artificer! DEX +2. WIS +2. PER +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Clockwork Expertise is now Level 1. DEX +2. PER +2.]

Knowledge of gears, cogs, sprockets and springs poured into the Mimic's mind. Now it could finally build something other than those entry-level Bladeblossoms.

[Clockwork Expertise]
A measure of an Artificer's ability to handle and construct clockwork-based gadgets and gizmos.
Requirements: Level 5 Artificer
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Grants knowledge of clockwork-based creations.
Increases the effectiveness of clockwork-based creations by 5% per Level of this Skill.

As for the Skill itself, the reason it appeared immediately was because that was another way in which Artisan Jobs differed from combat-oriented occupations. Their related Skills were acquired automatically at set Levels, and there was no choice involved in terms of specialization. At least until Level 50, at which point Boxxy would be able to evolve the Artificer Job into one that was better suited to its needs.

Another quirk the Mimic learned about Jobs during its stay here was that none of them granted additional Skills at the so-called threshold Levels of 25, 50, and 75. Reaching the absolute highest Level of 100, however, would unlock a superbly powerful Ultimate Skill that was uniquely suited to the individual. That sounded so incredibly tasty that it caused Boxxy to salivate like crazy every time it remembered that piece of trivia.

As for exactly why Skills were limited at those three specific Levels, it was unknown. The information Xera had dug up suggested this was simply the way of things. Boxxy had more or less accepted that fact, as neither its Mimic nor its Warlock Job offered it a new Skill upon reaching Level 25. So it was not surprised to find out the Artificer one would be the same.

Now that its immediate objective was complete, the Mimic turned its attention to Xera.

"Snack, what did you find?"

The demoness was under orders to keep looking for information or items that the Mimic deemed necessary. The fact she had returned meant she must have found something.

"I have … acquired one of the materials you needed for your ritual, Master."

Boxxy's mood shot up upon hearing those words. "Give it to me!"

"Yes, Master."

The succubus still masquerading as a nun stood in front of the Mimic and lifted up the hem of her habit. She rolled it up past her knees, up her thighs and all the way to the hips. It should come as no surprise that the perverted demon was not wearing anything under it, as evidenced by how her nether region was on full display.

"Mmmm …" she moaned. "Haah, haah, haah! Hnnnngg!"

Her abdominal muscles tightened, and then –

Pop

– a small black sphere about five centimetres in diameter came out of her exposed lower lips. It bounced twice along the filthy wooden floor and rolled slowly towards the Mimic, stopping only a few centimetres from where it was sitting. The gem-like ball was oddly shiny, and not just because it was covered in Xera's juices.

The fake nun straightened out her habit and looked at her Master with slightly glazed eyes.

"One Holy Pearl infused with demonic essence as requested, Master."

“Very good!” exclaimed Boxxy.

If sentient chests could smile, then that was undoubtedly what Boxxy was trying to do with that toothy look it had. This was very good indeed. All that was left was to obtain a Midnight Ruby, an Elixir of Avarice, and then wait for a night where all three moons were in the sky and it could finally perform the enticingly-titled Ritual of Unholy Wealth.

Part Four

After stowing away the once-pure Holy Pearl, Boxxy turned its attention back to the grey toolbox on the floor. It opened its maw and retrieved the blue toolbox from earlier, setting it down next to the other and unlatching the lid. This one also had numerous bits and pieces, although the majority of them were various sizes of cogs, sprockets, and gears, complete with some wound springs, an assortment of tiny screws, and a collection of small metal plates. Just the right ingredients to build designs that relied on Clockwork Expertise. The last remaining toolbox it bought from Fizzy, the red one, held the ingredients and components for creating explosives, although *that* would have to wait until Artificer Level 10.

Kora and Xera watched in silence as their master prepared its many-tooled limbs and once more began assembling a new device. However, this was something vastly different from the Bladeblossoms it had mass produced until now. To begin with, the metal plate that would serve as the base of the contraption wasn’t circular, but rectangular. And it was significantly larger at about fifteen centimetres long and three-and-a-half centimetres wide. The Mimic’s ‘hands’ also moved much slower than before as it punched a few holes into the thin plate and started screwing gears into it.

The reason for the loss in speed was simple – this was its first time handling these delicate components seriously. It did get some practice working with clockwork contraptions in its teacher’s workshop earlier, but that was while using the clumsy fingers of a human. Clockwork Expertise also helped, but that Skill only granted theoretical knowledge. Boxxy always learned faster by doing than by thinking, so it made sure to take things slowly until it felt more confident in its actions.

Still, it wasn't like it didn't listen to Fizzy's instructions. Quite the contrary, it absorbed every little insightful detail she revealed, either through her words or actions. Where to apply pressure, how much of it to use, what parts needed additional grease, how much strain the delicate gears could take before their teeth broke, and other useful tips that could only be gleaned from years of experience. As for the Skill-derived knowledge, that had mostly to do with schematics and blueprints rather than any practical advice.

[Proficiency level increased. Metal Mimicry is now Level 3. STR +2. END +2. All Attributes +1.]

Working with new parts also demanded new tools. And while it did technically pay good money for those, it could produce far better results by forming them out of its own body. It couldn't exactly maintain its sense of touch once turning its flesh to steel, but using instruments directly connected to its nervous system was definitely the superior approach. It was a level of manual dexterity that no human, dwarf, or gnomish Artificer could hope to match, no matter how high their Attributes or Levels climbed.

Speaking of which, the Mimic had made an interesting observation ever since the Calamity of Monotal. It appeared that, on average, Skills acquired at higher Job Levels provided additional Attributes whenever they went up in Proficiency. This realisation made the Mimic feel scammed in that respect since it had already used one of its very limited unlock points on a Level 1 Skill instead of a Level 30 Skill. Then again, missing out on Attributes wasn't that big a deal when it had Cadaver Absorption on hand to fill the gap.

Now was not the time to get complacent, however. Boxxy had been spying on a team of adventurers in the field, and what it saw was worrisome. Those four people were said to have attained Level 60 recently, which was comparable to the Mimic's total Job Level, and yet they completely outperformed it. Not only was their teamwork something else entirely, but each individual was also immensely powerful.

That was when Boxxy realised the biggest, most damning difference between itself and individual adventurers: their gear.

Magic weapons, sturdy armour, enchanted jewellery, and potent potions. Each item they had provided them with some Attribute bonus or other special effect that allowed them to fight toe-to-toe with physically superior monsters. This was why the Mimic had resolved to obtain gear of its own. Those two shiny daggers it got off of the dungeon master were a start, but there were only so many things that would let themselves be stabbed to death.

However, when Boxxy set about fulfilling its new goal, it immediately ran into its first hurdle – enchanted gear cost money.

A *lot* of money.

Money, aside from being shiny, could also be exchanged for goods and services; that was simply how civilized society worked. And although the monster had some starting capital, it wouldn't be nearly enough for its needs. Of course, it could always attempt to loot said magical equipment off the adventurers' dead bodies, but would it really survive an encounter with them? No, no it would not. It had complete confidence it would lose if it ever had to fight *that* particular team, regardless of whether or not it got a successful ambush off.

And so it found the Mercenary Guild and started taking on Quests. Its initial monetary reserves swelled to about 2,400 GP, and then it went shopping. Potions were easy enough to obtain from merchants and peddlers. In fact, the Mimic currently had ten of them in Storage, although they were of varying quality. The four most potent ones it had could instantly restore up to 300 HP but were also quite expensive at 190 GP apiece.

"What's with that stupid price! 50 HP potions only cost 16 GP each!" had been the creature's initial reaction to that seemingly exorbitant price tag.

As it turned out, the vast majority of alchemical products had undesirable side effects. After all, the difference between medicine and poison was mostly in the dosage, and magical liquids were no exception. Consuming too many potions in a short amount of time would inflict a condition known as 'potion sickness.' Exactly how much a body could take varied between individuals, and the Mimic found out its limit was five potions per day. Any more than that and its body would be wracked with immense pain, its movements would grow dull and sluggish, and it would suffer a penalty to

its Attributes. This lasted for almost six hours before its body could recover from the built-up toxicity.

Having experienced this with its own body helped Boxxy realise why higher quality potions were so much more expensive. One could only rely on a very limited number of alchemical elixirs during a fight, so quality was far more valuable than quantity. Buying the good stuff also meant that the Mimic's gold reserves took a big hit, but it wasn't too upset about that since being poor and alive was preferable to being rich and dead.

Having solved its medication needs, the shapeshifter moved on to check out the prices of enchanted arms and armour. It visited five stores, each of which advertised selling 'mid-range adventurer gear.' It didn't see a single piece that was cheaper than 800 GP. There was even a really fancy-looking set of armour that had a five-digit price tag, though Boxxy did its best to ignore the actual numbers. Not only was that amount clearly beyond its means, but it feared it might be traumatized if it looked at it directly.

Overall, the window-shopping spree had taught the monster two things. The good news was that the mithril daggers and enchanted knife it already had looked to be of decent make and would net it a mouth-watering 1,200 GP if it sold them. It wasn't about to pawn off its shiniest belongings, but that information was good to know. The bad news was that the most vital piece of equipment – namely armour – was out of the question.

It wasn't just the cost; that could easily be resolved if Boxxy put enough work in with the Mercenary Guild. But most armour was made to fit people, not chests. Oh sure, the Mimic was capable of disguising itself as one, but that was still just a facade made of flesh. It was an unfamiliar form that was extremely awkward to fight in as it played havoc with the sentient chest's sense of balance and direction. Just walking around was difficult enough, so combat was out of the question entirely. Any enemy that could be defeated by that shape's awkward flailing would hardly be considered as an opponent that required magical equipment.

And that was when Boxxy found out about Artificers. About how they could build unorthodox weapons and gear that seemingly ignored standard conventions. Transforming shields, repeating crossbows, multi-purpose projectile launchers, metal boots that allowed flight, gadgets that rendered one invisible, weapons that outright shot lightning – the list of fascinating

inventions went on and on and on. But perhaps the most alluring part of that profession was the ability to create truly original works that were custom-tailored to fit the needs of their creator. Even if said creator was a violent box with a penchant for sticking pointy objects into fleshy things.

Of course, Boxxy was intrigued by this Job. Using cheap tricks and unexpected manoeuvres to confuse and befuddle its opponent was its way of life, so the possibilities it saw within the Artificer Job were truly delicious. Granted, most of this information it got second-hand from Xera, but it could easily confirm the details if it visited the best (and only) Artificer trainer in the city.

Which was how it met Cornie Fizzlesprocket and obtained the Artificer Job from her for a fee, all in the same day. Well, it also had to have her memory wiped since it got over-excited and licked her face with a clearly inhuman one-metre-long tongue, but that was beside the point.

However, it would appear that making original designs from scratch was well out of the moronic chest's current abilities. It didn't even know how screws, nuts, and bolts even worked, let alone gears, springs, or magnets. To say it had gone in over its lid was an understatement. Thankfully the Artificer Job and its derived Skills would grant the knowledge and expertise necessary to create all those wondrous devices Boxxy had heard about. Provided the monster put in the time, effort and resources to raise them properly, of course.

This course of action was precisely what the Mimic was currently engaged in. A future where it could unleash all manner of deadly contraptions on its foes was a tremendous source of motivation. Plus, it found the act of tinkering to be uniquely tasty. These two reasons were why the only noises that could be heard throughout the abandoned warehouse's old office for the past hour were the clacking and scraping sounds of an Artificer immersed in their work. And the fruits of that labour took shape as a metal dagger handle with a slot where the blade should be.

[You have created a Retractable Blade of Poor quality.]

The name of the thing was indicative of its function. Boxxy opened its mouth and a pale humanoid arm stretched out of it. The Retractable Blade was then partially absorbed by this arm, sinking into the skin just above the

wrist. And then the Mimic activated it by triggering the small switch hidden inside the out-of-place limb's skin.

SNIKT

A ten-centimetre-long steel blade popped out just above its wrist and over its knuckles.

"Holy shit!"

"Whoa! Hey, that's pretty cool!"

The two demons that had been sitting quietly until now let out surprised voices. Xera was momentarily startled while Kora was actually impressed. Of course, they saw the assembly start to finish, but they had no idea what this blade-in-a-box was supposed to actually do until they saw it with their own eyes.

SNI-SNIKT

The blade disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, although it failed to retract fully on the first try. As one would expect from a Poor quality item, it had some glaring defects. Boxxy thought this was a good start though, as its main goal here was increasing its Artificer Levels. It hardly mattered if the Retractable Blade was crappy, as the monster could achieve a far superior result if it put its Metal Mimicry to use. It had no intention of putting the thing to use, but the curious box still wondered how effective a weapon it actually was.

Luckily, it had just the test subject on hand to help it find out.

"Snack, come over here and stand still," it commanded.

The succubus, having no choice in the matter, did as ordered and stood before her master while still disguised as a nun. She had a pretty good idea of what was about to happen, so she was unabashedly looking forward to this next bit. And indeed, just as she'd deduced, her master swung that freakish arm towards her chest. She envisioned a scenario where the blade would pop out at the last moment and strike into her with added momentum and force.

SNIKT

[You have suffered a deep wound. HP -122.]

“Guheh! Heeeh! Hnnnn!”

Which was precisely what had happened. The specially-designed iron blade skewered her left breast and pierced her torso. If she had a heart, it would undoubtedly be stabbed clean through. But since she didn’t, she could just revel in the delicious sensations of being penetrated by something long and hard.

Boxxy, on the other hand, was slightly disappointed. This amount of damage was quite terrible. Was it because this weapon wasn’t a dagger, technically speaking? They were somewhat similar but very different at the same time, so it was possible that its Dagger Mastery did not apply in this case. Or maybe the reason for this subpar performance was because the device was of shoddy make?

The Mimic briefly thought back on the last hour and remembered that it slightly bent the main lynchpin during assembly. That was probably why the knife couldn’t be reeled in and also why there was a small time lag between the trigger being pressed and the blade popping out.

The rookie Artificer figured it might as well take the thing apart and see if it messed up anything else.

SNAP

However, attempting to pull the weapon out of the demon’s torso caused it to break off, leaving the succubus with a large metal fragment sticking out of her left boob. Well ... that wasn’t supposed to happen, but it did anyway. Boxxy had shaved away too much material from the brace that connected the handleless knife to the rest of the contraption, which snapped under the sudden strain.

“Ahhhn, haaaa!”

As for Xera, she was understandably still in pain. And she was also – albeit less understandably – still enjoying it. That was when the Mimic had a flash of inspiration. It made a fist and punched the succubus in her wound, driving the blade even farther inside her.

“GYAAAH! Haaaahn!”

[Your target has suffered internal injury. Target HP -71.]

The demon fell over backwards, screaming, her mostly decorative blood flying everywhere. The Mimic loomed over her, holding one of the cheaper healing potions it had. The succubus looked up at it in between wails of pain and pleasure but had no idea what was about to happen. Surely that selfish master of hers wasn't about to heal her in this situation, right?

Contrary to her expectations though, that was precisely what happened. Boxxy poured the magical liquid directly onto the wound. Doing so instead of drinking it would concentrate the potion's effect on that part of the body, restoring less HP overall but instantly treating critical injuries. It looked as if the knife-eared Alchemist that sold it the magical medicine had been telling the truth, as the bleeding gash was sealed within the blink of an eye.

With the foreign object still inside.

"AAAAAARHH! ARRRGHAA! AAAAAAAAH!"

The test subject started screaming her lungs out. These were no longer lustful half-moans brought on by one's kink, but the wailing of a woman being tortured. She thrashed about wildly as the magical liquid tried to make her body bond with the metal blade that clearly didn't belong to it. Her HP didn't take any damage, but the pain she felt was like every nerve in her chest was on fire.

Another tip that old Alchemist gave Boxxy was to make sure that no foreign objects like shards of glass or arrowheads remained in the open wound before applying a potion directly to it. The Mimic wasn't sure how that mattered until it witnessed the results for itself. Drinking the concoction normally would cause the healing effect to work from the inside out, causing any foreign objects to be pushed out of the body. However, using it directly on the injury would have the opposite effect, resulting in what Xera was currently going through.

"Stand up," commanded the Mimic.

The wailing succubus made an effort to follow this order, but every single movement caused bolts of pain to shoot through her chest, all the way into the back of her head. The white-hot sensation made her stumble over and fall down to the ground, which only aggravated her condition. She continued wailing like a banshee that was having all her teeth and nails

pulled out simultaneously and seemed physically incapable of fulfilling Boxxy's directions.

The Mimic was quite satisfied with this outcome. It had no idea that a disposable blade and a cheap potion could produce a result like that but wasn't about to complain. It made a mental note of this combination, as it could very well be used to disable an opponent in the future. Whether it could actually pull off such a thing in the heat of combat was another question entirely, but it was good to have options.

[Your familiar has been dismissed.]

Having finished its impromptu experiment, the Mimic sharpened its focus and forcibly dismissed its familiar, causing both her screaming and thrashing to cease immediately. Xera's now lifeless physical form disappeared within seconds, as did any bodily fluids she left behind. All that was left of her was the broken off Retractable Blade. The Mimic nonchalantly picked it up and examined it. It was still in near-pristine condition so it could undoubtedly be reused. Satisfied, it sat back down in its little work area, re-summoned the succubus and went about dismantling the rest of its first clockwork-based gadget.

Kora, having watched the whole ordeal, was more than a little disturbed. Even if she wasn't as susceptible to pain as her co-contractor, she seriously doubted whether she could bear that. Yet she was still somewhat curious whether she could handle it, in a sort of 'if there's a mountain, you have to climb it' kind of way. However, even she wasn't stupid enough to ask her sadistic box of a master about that and was instead busy thanking her lucky stars it wasn't her turn to be used as a punching bag.

In the end, she resolved to satisfy her morbid curiosity by questioning the one who had gone through it.

"Hey, Slagathor," she called out in a low voice.

There was no way the succubus didn't hear her, yet she showed no reaction and gave no response. She just kept staring absentmindedly in the Mimic's general direction. Kora naturally did not appreciate being ignored, so she exerted more effort in getting her fellow demon's attention –

"Oy! I'm talking to you!"

SLAP

– mostly by raising her voice and hitting her co-contractor across the face with a backhanded strike that was more of a punch than a slap.

“Yeeeees? Whaaat is it?”

That seemed to do the trick as Xera looked away from the Mimic and stared at the fiend. However, those glassy eyes, loopy grin, and silly way of speaking were completely unlike her.

“You’re acting weird. Weirder than normal, I mean,” Kora pointed out. “Did your rotten head break even further?”

“Hee hee hee … Maaaybee!” Xera answered in an uncharacteristically cheerful voice.

“ … Okay, seriously. What’s going on? Do I have to call Demons ‘R’ Us?”

It didn’t matter to Kora how much physical torment her co-contractor went through, but the fiend would take action immediately if the succubus’s immortal soul was in danger. No demon, no matter how depraved, insane, or selfish, would truly wish to see their fellow residents of the Beyond disappear for good. And they got along much better than one would normally expect, so Kora’s unusual show of concern was quite genuine.

“Oh, nooooo! Nothing like thaaaat,” Xera responded in a half-singing voice. “I had just forgotten how, nnnn, *thorough* my Master can be!”

This was the first time in a long while she had been abused to that extent. It was far more exhilarating than anything Kora had done to her. Of course, the fiend broke her bones and bruised her body during their extremely violent sessions, but she still held herself back. Mostly because their Master only allowed the two to engage in strictly non-lethal antics, but also because the red-skinned giantess was growing a little bit soft on her.

Boxxy, on the other hand, just saw her as a tool – a *thing*. It regarded her as nothing more than its possession, something to be used and thrown away as an owner saw fit. There was no doubt in the succubus’s mind that the only reason she wasn’t still writhing in agony on the floor was because Boxxy wanted to retrieve its component from inside her. That, or she was simply being too noisy for its liking.

Of course, the Mimic didn't *literally* consider her as an inanimate object. It still understood that demons were living beings with thoughts, opinions, and emotions of their own. It just actively ignored that side of them until it became a problem. In Xera's opinion, although Kora's physical abuse was – for lack of a better word – quite tasty, the fiend paled in comparison to Boxxy. Nothing could make the succubus's twisted heart race quite like the malicious neglect of her one and only Master. Well, metaphorically speaking, at least.

" … I swear, you are getting creepier by the day," Kora said.

Xera did not respond. She simply kept staring at her master working on its little contraption while humming a random tune under her breath.

Part Five

It could be said that the Calamity of Monotal served as a sort of wake-up call for the Empire's complacent nobles. A good example of this was the Lord-Mayor in charge of Erosa. In the past, he had been quite stingy with the city's defensive budget, although the same could be said of many of his peers. At least he was justified, in that Cradle Valley was a relatively peaceful place, far away from any external threats and with very few internal problems. However, his stance changed practically overnight when the grim rumours surrounding Monotal were confirmed to be true.

Money was poured into the guardsmen responsible for Erosa's security. Equipment was ordered and delivered, salaries were raised, training was intensified, and recruitment drives were started. The lord even went as far as authorizing so-called 'power-levelling' expeditions for his guardsmen. This was a practice whereby a group of powerful adventurers would be paid to act as babysitters to one or more weaker individuals. These weaklings would attack strong monsters and inflict some modicum of damage, and the bodyguards would then swoop in and secure the kill.

This method led to a dramatic increase in one's Job Level and any related Attributes but also came with a downside. The power-leveller would be left with their Skills and weapon Masteries woefully undeveloped. This created a very real problem that was referred to in the adventurer community as 'hollow power.' It meant that an individual whose strength had been

coddled rather than forged through their own merits would lead them astray. They would grow overconfident and arrogant without having the basic abilities, combat experience, or ‘battle sense’ to back them up. There were, of course, those who sought to actively rectify this flaw and fill in the gaps, but they were often few and far between.

So while power-levelling was effective in rapidly increasing one’s martial or mystical might, it was quite frowned upon by veteran adventurers – who were also, ironically enough, the only ones who could reliably fulfil such requests. However, the province was in a state of emergency. The lord had to take drastic measures to make sure that not only was Erosa kept safe, but that its citizens also *felt* safe, and the local guilds supported his policies.

As a result, the city’s security force experienced an explosive growth in both quantity and quality. Within the span of ten days, it went from two hundred guardsmen with an average Level of 20 to four hundred well-armed soldiers with a Level of at least 35. This allowed patrols to be tightened and security checkpoints to be beefed up. There was even an anti-intrusion enchantment placed along the walls that would trigger an alarm should someone or something try to sneak in over them. It caused a few problems until it was calibrated to ignore most common birds, but that was a minor hiccup.

There were, of course, more major hiccups. Many of the newly hired guards, for example, didn’t particularly care for the people and simply wanted to get paid. There were even a few bad apples who tried their hand at smuggling or absconding with their issued weapons and armour, but they were quickly rooted out and punished accordingly.

The overall result of this initiative was still positive in the short-term. The commoners were reassured their taxes were being well spent and the adventurer types that poured in from all over the country were less inclined to stir up trouble.

It was too early to tell if there had been any sort of effect on the crime rate, though that certainly didn’t seem to be the case. While patrols within the city’s walls increased, unrest also swelled with all the refugees and adventurers passing through. The slums were mostly ignored by law enforcement and its residents were still treated as nothing more than a statistic. Nobody with any actual power would really notice or care if a

bunch of them went missing. They were too busy focusing on new threats instead of dealing with existing ones. So while there was an overall heavier presence of guards within and around Erosa, it was mostly concentrated on the city's gates, walls, and main streets.

And tonight was no different. There was a regiment of fourteen guards standing at attention at the city's northern entrance, even though the sun had set long ago, and the vast majority of the town's population was fast asleep. Eight of them were on the outer side of the gatehouse while the remaining six kept an eye on the inside. And one of those six noticed a pair of shadows approach his position from the darkened street.

"Who goes there?" he called out.

His colleagues immediately raised their guard at his words. The area around the gate was bathed in the warm yellow light of the torches, but it was still hard to make out people's faces until they got closer.

"It is I, my child," called out the smaller silhouette with a clear, calming voice.

The image of a humble nun in service to the Goddess Teresa gradually became clearer with every step she made. She wore a plain, dark grey habit with the image of a small golden hammer embroidered on either shoulder. Her face was easy on the eyes and, although she looked to be in her early 20s, she carried herself with an undeniable sense of grace and humility.

"Ah, sister Lyo?" said the guard after he recognized her. "Going out to gather Moonblossoms again?"

"Indeed, my child. I am afraid the orphan in my care is still suffering from night terrors."

Moonblossoms were a herb said to bestow sweet dreams on anyone who drank tea made from its petals. The catch was that the flower withered quickly and, as suggested by its name, only bloomed under the moonlight. Therefore, it was perfectly reasonable for one to gather the herb after dark if they hoped to make use of its sleep-inducing properties.

"And, uh, mister tall, dark, and gruesome there will be your escort?"

The guard pointed at the person following behind the nun. He was a heavyset man who stood at over two metres in height. The heavy cloak he

wore concealed both his face and his body. The suspicious looking individual didn't speak, merely nodding his head deeply in response to the guard's inquiry.

"That is so," confirmed the nun.

"Are you certain you will be fine with just him?"

"Do not fret, my child. He is most capable."

"Well yeah, I know it's not the first time you've hired him, but I can't help but worry sending you out there with a shady guy like that."

"I appreciate your concern, but please be at ease. I trust my dear cousin with my life."

"Ah, your cousin is it?"

If the good sister said it was so, then it must have been the truth. After all, she was one of the devout servants of Teresa, the Goddess of Truth and Justice.

"Apologies, sister Lyo. I just can't help but worry. I, uhm, heard about the break-in at the temple."

Someone had snuck into the local temple of Teresa and absconded with one of the Holy Pearls kept there. Pretty much the entire city knew by now, even though the heinous act had only come to light this afternoon.

"Indeed, a very horrid affair," said the nun with a hint of sadness in her voice. "I pray the misguided soul who took that sacred treasure will see the light of Her Truth and beg for Her forgiveness."

The nun raised her right hand up to her face and pressed the tips of her middle and index fingers to her lips, forehead, and left breast in turn. Many of the guards present there repeated the religious gesture. Its meaning could be loosely interpreted as, 'Let my mouth speak only the truth that resides within my mind and heart.'

The well-meaning guard then ordered the rest to make way for the devout nun and her companion. They guided them respectfully through the heavily guarded door on the side of the gate and kept a watchful eye on them as they made their way into the darkness that lay beyond the city's walls.

“I don’t like that guy,” one of the men stationed outside the wall said to his older colleague once the two travellers were out of sight.

“Yeah I know,” agreed his fellow watchman. “Gives me the creeps, you know?”

“What? Oh yeah, I guess there’s that, too.”

“Huh? What were you talking about, then?”

“Nothing much. Just a bit jealous, I suppose.”

“You are? Of what?”

“I mean, he gets to spend time with a cute girl like that for the night. You know how it is – just the two of them … under a moonlit sky … away from prying eyes … ”

The other guy raised his hand, gesturing for his colleague to shut up. “I am going to pretend I didn’t just hear you insinuate that sister Lyo is having an immoral tryst with her *cousin*.”

“How’d you know they haven’t done it?”

“Because, you idiot, that’s fucking sick. Not only that, but there’s no way of one Teresa’s faithful would break their oath of celibacy.”

Swearing to maintain one’s chastity wasn’t a practice that was as widespread as it used to be, but it was still very common among the human-dominated Lodrak Empire’s clergy. The ones in Erosa were no exception.

“Yeah? And how would you know sister Lyo hasn’t done it?”

“Because Teresa’s the Goddess of Truth.”

“Yeah? So?”

“So? Do you honestly think She’d let anyone get off easy if they dared break an oath made in Her holy name? They’d get branded with the Taboo Skill for sure!”

The effects of that Skill were, simply put, to alienate the bearer from all religious orders and pious believers. It was basically the Gods’ way of marking those who actively and knowingly went against their will. It was pretty much a death sentence in some of the more … fanatical corners of the world.

“Oh, right,” said the younger guard. “That was a thing, wasn’t it?”

He vaguely remembered hearing something like that from his mum, but he had forgotten about it since he wasn’t a particularly religious guy. He had far more important things to worry about than some far-off Gods. Like putting food on the table, or finding an apothecary to treat that weird boil on his bum.

“Hey, you lot!” called out someone from on top of the gatehouse. “Be quiet down there and pay attention! If someone or something sneaks past us it’ll be on all our heads!”

“Yes sir!” replied the two undisciplined guards as they resumed their duties.

Tensions were indeed high since the Calamity of Monotal, so they could not afford to be careless. That was the whole point of all the beefed-up security measures in the first place. Which was more than a little ironic since the creature responsible for that disaster had just slipped by them anyway.

Actually, it was more accurate to say that it had slipped *under* them.

As it turned out, all the guards and magical security systems were no match for a mimic with a penchant for digging and too much free time on its hands. Or was that tentacles? Tongues? Legs, maybe?

Regardless of Boxxy’s confusing anatomy, it had simply made a tunnel that went under the western section of the wall. The entrance was near its hideout in the slums, and the exit was some distance away from the wall, impossible to spot at a distance. Of course, the heavy security measures weren’t in place when the Mimic first got there, and it could leisurely climb over the wall.

But that was then, this was now. Attempting something like that after the detection enchantment had been placed was sure to cause an alarm. Trying to get past the security checkpoints was also quite problematic. The monster seriously doubted whether it had the people skills to not make them suspicious of its true nature, so it opted to avoid them entirely.

Granted, the subterranean route wasn’t its only option. There was also the possibility of infiltrating the city by walking along the bottom of the Whispering Canal. The deep, narrow river provided Erosa with fresh drinking water and ran right through the centre of the city. Going through

the drains built into the city's thick stone walls was an obvious choice, but Boxxy had to give up on that path. The water was crystal clear for the most part, so anyone and anything would be able to spot it moving along the bottom. There was also the very real worry of running out of breath.

The fact that the wall's submerged drain pipe had not one, not two, but a series of *four* metal grates protecting it had very little to do with Boxxy's decision to avoid that place, okay?

Having passed through its tunnel, the Mimic emerged into the night under the cover of darkness. Since the west side of the city wall had no gates, it only had to worry about the people patrolling on top of and around the wall, but the distance between them and it was already more than sixty metres. It also made sure to cover its faux-wooden body in imitation grass and leaves in order to blend in with the knee-high grass that surrounded the plains to the west of the city.

Boxxy scuttled along towards the Troll Woods in the distance but made a slight detour. It noticed a nun and her towering escort in the fields and decided to scout them out. It approached them silently under the cover of Stealth and the surrounding tall grass. It stalked them for a bit, sizing them up and gauging whether it should pounce. The woman that was busy picking flowers didn't seem to be particularly threatening, but the Mimic knew better than to underestimate the humans around these parts. Based on her religious vestments, it was very likely she was the holder of a Priest Job, although her Level was more or less a complete mystery.

Her escort was clearly a threat, however. Shining full plate could be seen under his cloak, while what was probably the handle of a greatsword stuck out from behind his head. He was obviously a close combat fighter, and although his Level was equally unknown, he was giving off a very dangerous feeling. Also, his gear looked particularly shiny and, as Boxxy found out recently, shiny things were expensive. Owning expensive things meant he must have had the money to buy them, which in turn meant he was probably a successful adventurer. And successful adventurers were the kind of monster-hunting experts who stood a real chance of defeating an uppity box that had gone in over its head.

Eventually the Mimic decided against attacking the two and skulked away towards its initial destination. If either of those two were alone, then it

would have definitely ambushed them. However, if they were together and it failed to take down the healer on the first strike, then its chances of winning that fight became close to zero. At that point it would have to retreat or lose its life. So, rather than gamble on a fight it wasn't certain it would win, it decided to avoid it completely and go hunt far more predictable prey like its fellow monsters instead.

Having made it to the edge of the Troll Woods about an hour later, the Mimic forcibly dismissed both Kora and Xera, who were currently still in the city, and summoned them to its new position as backup. It briefly considered doing this to get a drop on the two potential targets earlier, but quickly deemed that to be a terrible idea. The Summon Familiar Skill was quite flashy, so using it in the open fields just outside the city wall was a good way of getting itself noticed. Not only by the people in question but also by the sentries atop the wall.

The three of them set off into the thick woods, looking for a Bouncewood tree. Finding one only took about five minutes since the Mimic was already familiar with their shape, as this was far from its first visit to these parts. The tree's surface was black and smooth, just like the Quest said, and the reason for that was because its bark was essentially a form of natural rubber. Its appearance was also closer to that of an oversized palm tree than a pine or oak tree, although that little detail was well outside the purview of the Mimic's understanding of botany. The combination of the strange plant's bark and shape made it bouncy, stretchy and resilient, which made it an interesting component that could be useful to Artificers. Boxxy decided it would collect a few extra kilograms for itself, in addition to what was necessary for the Quest.

However, it soon found out exactly why this seemingly easy Quest had not been taken by someone else earlier.

Stripping away that bark was *hard*. It was impact resistant to the point where Kora's punches and kicks had absolutely no effect and merely bounced off. Trying to put her entire weight and power behind a double haymaker punch also proved to be useless. While her blow was a magnificent hit that would snap most trees in half, this one simply bent over. It then bounced back, making a weird **BOIOIOIOING** sound, and slapped Kora on the forehead, knocking her off her feet. The tree swayed

back and forth a few times before returning to its original position without suffering so much as a scratch.

Xera was also quite useless. She could, of course, set fire to it, but burning the bark they were here to collect defeated the purpose of the exercise. In the end, Boxxy transformed the tip of its tongue into a handaxe using Metal Mimicry and started hacking away at it. The tough material dented and dulled the handaxe surprisingly quickly, even though it had the toughness of real steel. That wasn't much of a problem since Boxxy could easily reshape it back to full sharpness, but it was still a frustrating chore.

It took the Mimic almost fifteen minutes of frantically hacking away at the relatively thin but incredibly annoying Bouncewood tree until it fell over. The tree's cross-section revealed that over two-thirds of it was nothing but rubber bark, which explained why it was so damned resilient.

Boxxy spent the next half hour or so stripping away and harvesting the bark, making sure to get big pieces when possible. It had a feeling those guys at the Mercenary Guild were bound to withhold part of its deposit if it tried to turn in 120 kilograms worth of rubber scraps. They'd already done that two days ago when it turned in ten troll hides that were riddled with holes and cuts. The dwarven bartender named Grog was even able to tell they were left behind by some sort of irregularly shaped bite marks, though he wasn't able to determine what monster they belonged to. Which was good, considering the monster in question was standing right next to him.

Once the tall, palm-like tree trunk was stripped of its bark, the Mimic started putting it away into its Storage. Once it had stowed away the last of it, it double checked its Quest's status.

Collect 120 KG of Bouncewood Bark
Description: Deliver 120 kilograms of Bouncewood Bark to the Mercenary Guild in the city of Erosa. Bouncewood trees may be found in the Troll Woods west of Erosa and are easily recognizable due to their smooth and black surface.
Difficulty: ★★
Time Limit: 3 days 8 hours
Deposit: 100GP
Reward: 100GP
Progress: 0/120

Well, that was odd. Usually the Progress counter that tracked the completion rate of a Quest's objective would update in real time, and Boxxy was quite sure it stowed away at least two hundred kilograms of the stuff by now. It was quite dense and heavy material, after all, so it shouldn't take a lot of volume to reach that sort of weight. Ah, but technically speaking, the objective was to *deliver* the stuff, not just gather it. Otherwise, it could legally get paid and then still keep the stuff for itself. As expected of the Mercenary Guild, their people knew how to avoid leaving obvious loopholes in their Quests that would compromise their profits.

Its business with this place was concluded, so the Mimic decided to leave the forest and go back to town before dawn came. As for its bound demons, they wouldn't fit in that narrow passage and had to be re-summoned every time Boxxy crossed the wall. It was annoying, but it was better than trying to sneak a two-and-a-half-metre-tall pile of rage and muscle through a small army of armed guards.

Therefore, once the three of them were clear of the forest, the Mimic ordered its familiars to remain behind and went on its way. Almost immediately, it heard the loud noises their usual shenanigans made, but it didn't bother with them. Any monsters they attracted with that racket would be entirely their problem to deal with.

As for Boxxy, it was already speeding towards the city. The Troll Woods were at a much higher elevation, which meant that getting there from Erosa involved walking uphill for about an hour. Going back, however, was a gradual downward slope, which meant the Mimic could roll almost the entire way to town by using wheels instead of legs.

The shapeshifting chest had already improved greatly upon its original design for the organic wheels. The complex limbs with a diameter of sixty centimetres now took only a few seconds to fully grow from scratch and no longer leaked like they used to. Granted, the ride along the uneven dirt was hardly comfortable, but it was hard to argue with the sort of speed the miniature murder wagon was picking up. It drastically reduced the time for its return trip, allowing the Mimic to cross the distance between the Troll Woods and Erosa three times faster than normal.

It would probably get to its destination even faster, but it couldn't roll all the way there. Even Boxxy understood that no amount of tall grass would

be able to hide a chest rolling along at high speed. Even if humans normally couldn't see very well in the dark, it was relatively cheap to buy a helmet or a pair of spectacles with a night-vision enchantment on them. So it was much safer to cross the last kilometre or so on foot. On its way back, the Mimic once again spied the nun and her protector out in the wilderness, in the same area they'd been a few hours ago.

However, it seemed the two of them had moved on from their flower-gathering mission to something else entirely. Something the Mimic had been witness to so many times in its short life that there was no way it wasn't familiar with it.

"Haahn! Yeah! Harder!"

In short, the tall escort was currently on top of the nun and 'escorting' himself into her rear entrance over and over. 'Taking it up the dirt road,' as it were, didn't count as far as sister Lyo's chastity vows were concerned, and she was far from the only one who skirted them in such a manner.

She *had* technically been truthful with the guard, though she still masked her real reason for coming out here. It was fine, though; to err was human, and she would be forgiven for playing fast and loose with her oaths so long as she sang a few hymns and said a few prayers. Easing her guilty conscience would come later. As for right now, she *really* needed some stress relief away from prying eyes.

Unfortunately for her, she failed to take into account that the act in question left both her and her escort naked, distracted, and with their backs wide open to attack.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 350% more damage. Target HP -753.]
[You have dealt a devastating blow. Target stunned for 5 seconds.]
[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 350% more damage. Target HP -914.]
[You have slain your target in a single strike. Assassination Proficiency increased.]

Honestly … It was like the pair were *begging* to be stabbed.

Part Six

“See! I smeggin’ told you so!”

The young and much-too-green guard gave a wide smile. He was obviously proud of himself. Or full of himself, depending on one’s point of view.

“Fine!” shouted the older guard in frustration. “I admit you were right!”

Those five words almost felt like someone stabbing him in the gut with a pitchfork. And Guardsman Thomas had hands-on experience with that particular sensation. It was indeed as unpleasant as it sounded.

“Now would you kindly shut the fuck up about it?” he grumbled.

“Hah,” scoffed the rookie, “I’ll shut up when you pay up!”

“ … Alright. Here.”

Thomas reached into his pocket and brought out a King piece, which was an extra large gold coin worth 50 GP. He handed it over resentfully to the cocky youngster. “Hope you choke on it.”

“Haha! C’mon man, don’t be so bitter. It was fair game and you know it.”

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever you say. I still say you cheated somehow.”

The two guardsmen had made a ‘friendly’ bet. The younger one, Shaw, insisted he could do a backflip while wearing the full plate armour that had become standard issue for all of Erosa’s guards. The squirt could barely even move in it properly when he signed up five days ago, yet he still pulled off the backflip like it was nothing. The explosive growth obtained from power-levelling was indeed frightening.

With their bit of fun concluded, the two resumed keeping an eye on the empty streets just inside the city’s northern gate. Of course, such frivolity was normally looked down upon, but these men understood that a little bit of excitement was sometimes necessary to keep the mind alert. That held especially true during these boring night shifts, and the four guards stationed nearby agreed completely. Still, they had jobs to do and wages to earn, so they kept the distractions to a minimum.

An hour or so later the sky started lighting up, signifying the approach of dawn, and with it would also come Thomas’s replacement. However,

instead of being elated, the middle-aged guard felt a sense of disquiet. Sister Lyo, who he had known for several years, had gone out on another trip to gather Moonblossoms.

This had been going on for about three weeks and had become a routine. She always said she stuck around the relatively safe grasslands immediately to the west of the city, and she always had that tall stranger with her for protection. Last night was the first time she identified him as her cousin, though Thomas didn't think much of it at the time. It wasn't like he had asked her about their relation, so he had no grounds to complain.

However, the pair were taking entirely too long. Usually they'd only be gone for a few hours, but that time had long since passed. Thomas had asked her about needing extra protection. If they turned up missing or even dead – no, he couldn't think that way. He had to believe they were alright, that they merely got caught up in something and would return shortly.

Unfortunately, sister Lyo and her bodyguard did not return before the end of his shift. His replacement came to take over his post at dawn and Thomas was then supposed to return to the barracks. Part of him wanted to stay and keep an eye out for her, but that wouldn't solve anything. And he would get in deep shit if he failed to check in his arms and armour on time. He'd heard what happened to some 'deserters' that tried to pull a fast one and abscond with the expensive items, and unlike *those* people, Thomas liked his head attached to the rest of his body.

He trudged off towards the barracks in the middle of the city along with the rest of his shiftmates. Shaw still had a cocky grin on his face due to winning that 50 GP bet and was already bragging about how he would spend it all at the nearest pub. Thomas had no such desires right now; he was way too tired and had too much on his mind to deal with rowdy rookies. Having young blood like them around was reassuring in case shit went down, but their attitude could use some serious adjustment. As for an old dog like Thomas, he had long ago found out it was best to ignore the things he couldn't do anything about and focus on the ones he could.

Which right now amounted to checking in his gear, reporting the missing persons, and getting some shuteye. Even if he was worried about the young nun, he surely wouldn't be the only one. The temple was bound to organize a search party once they heard one of their own had gone missing.

Experience told him their return was highly unlikely, but some part of him still clung to the hope that sister Lyo and her cousin would –

Wooosh

"Ugh!"

A shadow passed over Thomas, sending an unnatural chill down his spine. Turning around, he spotted a large, cloaked, familiar-looking figure walking along the middle of the mostly deserted street.

"Hey … Hey!" he called out. "Hey you! Big guy in the cloak – stop right there!"

The over two-metre-tall man froze and turned around to face him. His head was wrapped in a blue cloth and the heavy black cloak obscured his form. What little could be seen of his face was sickly pale, and his yellow eyes seemed to lick over Thomas as if tasting him. In one arm, he carried a heavy-looking bag that bulged out slightly from beneath his cloak.

The guardsman blinked a few times in surprise. What was he thinking? This clearly wasn't the cousin from last night. Sure, the size was similar, but that was pretty much it. Even if he couldn't see the face it was obvious this wasn't the same person.

"I apologize, my mistake. Carry on, citizen."

The stranger nodded in response and went about his way. Thomas watched the hooded figure absentmindedly until it disappeared into the nearby building belonging to the Mercenary Guild.

Now that he thought about it, didn't that guy seem suspicious? That bad feeling he gave off was –

Thomas shook his head to throw off his errant thoughts. His tired, worried mind was probably playing tricks on him. To think he accosted a random pedestrian like that. Thankfully none of the other passersby appeared to think badly of him, and some even seemed to say, 'Go on, arrest that freak!' with their eyes. He was far too tired to deal with some mysterious stranger though – not to mention the trouble he'd get into if he randomly arrested someone on a whim.

Having decided that rest was his top priority, he jogged up the street to catch up with his younger colleagues and continued on his way towards the barracks. Once there, he checked in his gear, reported the absence of sister Lyo and her bodyguard, crawled into his bunk, and slept the sleep of the dead just as planned.

He woke up about six hours later at high noon and went to have luckfast, a combination of lunch and breakfast – not to be confused with brunch. Once his hunger was properly satiated and his hazy mind cleared up, he left the barracks and went into the keep proper. He wanted to see his direct superior and ask if there'd been any sign of sister Lyo. Thomas had been the one to file the missing person's report earlier, and he was one of the last few people to see her alive. So he felt it was his responsibility to see this case through to the end.

The guardsman climbed up the stone steps inside the keep, up to the third floor. He walked down one hallway, then another, and finally a third before reaching his destination.

Knock knock

"Enter," came a clear voice from the other side of the door.

Thomas quickly opened it and walked inside.

The office itself was nothing extraordinary – just a desk, a few chairs, and a whole lot of cabinets. Sitting behind the desk, scribbling on a piece of paper, was a slightly overweight, balding man with a goatee.

The out-of-uniform guardsman walked up to the foot of the desk and saluted. "Lieutenant Porkins, sir! Guardsman Thomas requesting a moment of your time, sir!"

The man with the oddly fitting name put down his quill and looked up. "Guardsman Thomas, eh?"

"Yes, sir! I'm here to inquire about the missing person, Lyo Rosetta, sir."

"Are you?" Porkins raised an eyebrow. "Hmm, this is good. Excellent timing, actually. I was just about to have someone send for you regarding that matter. Have a seat."

He gestured at the empty chair opposite the desk, which the simple guardsman respectfully took.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Now then,” said Porkins, putting away the document he was working on. “As I’m sure you’ve already guessed, the local temple of Teresa immediately organized and sent out a search party in response to your report. They’ve been scouring the area north and west of the city all the way to the Troll Woods, but there has been no sign of her or this cousin of hers.”

“Nothing at all, sir?”

“No, guardsman. Not a trace of her or that swordsman. It’s like they disappeared in a puff of smoke.”

That was unusual. Thomas was sure Lyo was at least a Level 40 Priestess and it was quite obvious that muscle-bound juggernaut of a bodyguard would not go down easily. There ought to have been at least *some* signs of a struggle if a fight had broken out.

“That is … unsettling. Sir.”

“Indeed. Tell me, guardsman, how long have you known the young Miss Roseta?”

“About three years, sir. Four this summer.”

“And were you two close?”

“Not particularly, sir. I’d say we were more than acquaintances, but not quite friends. Sir.”

After all, a gate guardsman and a nun have very little interaction aside from seeing each other in passing every so often. Thomas was a somewhat devout man, so he made sure to treat clergy like her with extra care and respect, but that was about the gist of it.

“And her cousin?”

“Only seen him a few times these past few weeks, sir. We haven’t exchanged words. I didn’t even know he was her cousin until she mentioned it last night, sir.”

“Did she actually say that, though?”

“Pardon, sir?”

“What were her exact words, guardsman?”

“…”

Thomas thought back to that meeting, trying to recall as many details as he could. Well ... the encounter had been more or less the only highlight of the night, so it wasn’t that difficult a task.

“Ah… I believe her exact words were, ‘I trust my cousin with my life,’ sir.”

“And you didn’t feel the presence of Taboo after she said that?”

“No, sir.”

She was a Priestess sworn in service to Teresa. If she had told a lie, Thomas was sure he would’ve instantly felt the Taboo from her. Merely looking at someone branded with that heretic’s mark of a Skill made his skin crawl. A truly disgusting, unsettling feeling, as if looking at a rat or a cockroach crawling around in the filth.

“I see … But she did not explicitly state that the man present was her cousin, did she?”

Porkins had a point. Lyo had stated that she trusted her cousin. Not that the man next to her *was* her cousin.

“ … Permission to speak freely, sir?”

“Granted.”

“What is going on?”

The lieutenant’s tone of voice suggested he had some misgivings about this missing person that went beyond simple concern.

“Hmm, I suppose if anyone deserves to know, it’s you. You *are* involved in this after all.” Porkins leaned forward and put his elbows on top of the desk. “I had a meeting with the bishop from Teresa’s temple a few hours ago. We had words at length about our missing nun. It appears she had been acting strangely these last few weeks, ever since that stranger showed up. Our investigation of her personal effects this morning revealed she does indeed have a cousin, but that person should be living on the other side of the country right now.”

In other words, while she didn't lie, she didn't exactly reveal the truth either.

"The thing is," continued Porkins, "I can forgive her for wanting to keep her affairs private. I've always felt it was unfair for those people to be prohibited from keeping even the tiniest of secrets. However, her disappearance yesterday happened with some … interesting timing."

"Timing, sir?"

Porkins nodded.

That was when Thomas finally realised what the lieutenant was getting at.

A valuable treasure had disappeared from the temple of Teresa. A nun serving in that very same temple left the city several hours afterwards and vanished without a trace. She even had a hunky, well-armed bodyguard with her. Someone she intentionally misled others to believe was her relative. And all this happened during a time of civil unrest caused by an incomprehensible disaster, which was bound to drive sane people to do stupid things out of their misguided fear.

It didn't take a genius to connect those dots and paint a picture of a disillusioned nun robbing her temple and running off with some forbidden lover.

"Ohhh … shit," cursed Thomas.

"A whole cartload of it," Porkins agreed. "Just keep your conclusions to yourself, guardsman. We really cannot afford to have people start questioning the temples. Or even worse, having the Goddess herself question *us*." The overweight officer sighed and sat back in his chair. He rubbed his temple, suggesting this affair was giving him no end of troubles. "Our official stance at this point is that they're merely missing persons, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Of course Thomas understood why such things had to be done. He didn't like it, but it was a necessary measure. Besides, he felt like he had no room to comment. After all, the suspect had slipped away under his watch. Was he perhaps too trusting for this sort of work? No, that wasn't it. If he

couldn't even trust the word of a servant of Teresa, then he'd probably be a failure as a human being.

"Good. Your cooperation is appreciated, guardsman. Take the rest of the day off. Dismissed."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

Thomas stood up, saluted once more, and exited the office. He passed by the lieutenant's new assistant on the way out and exchanged greetings. His gaze lingered on her for several seconds. It was uncharacteristic of him, but he couldn't help himself. Something about that girl just seemed to demand his attention. It was probably the combination of her beautiful face, enormous rack, and plump ass, all wrapped up in that tight uniform.

Wait, was *that* why the lieutenant hired her a few days ago? Nah, couldn't be. Porkins was a happily married and dutiful man. If he hired her, then it was probably for her ability rather than her looks.

Yes… he thought. *Probably.*

Thomas shook away the improper thoughts. His superior officer's personal life really wasn't high on his list of priorities. Having been given some time off so suddenly, he decided to go for a walk around town. He rarely had the chance to just relax these days, since he was either on duty or drilling the new recruits. They could've at least bumped his pay if they were going to dump those kids on his shoulders. Ah, but they did technically up his pay a week ago, didn't they? Guess he had no more room for –

Woosh

"Ugh!"

There it was again! A vague feeling of panic out of nowhere that caused the hair on his neck to stand on end. Looking back, Thomas once again saw that looming cloaked figure – the one he'd earlier mistook for Lyo's 'cousin.' The off-duty guard watched curiously as the figure walked off, leaving him keenly aware that this bizarre sensation was not just his imagination.

So what was it, then? The feeling he gave off was distinctly different from Taboo, yet equally unpleasant. Maybe some other strange Skill he had? Come to think of it, he was one of those Mercenary Guild types and what little could be seen of his skin looked terrible. Maybe it was a curse of some

sort? Or some strange disease? Would it really be safe to let someone like that walk around town?

It wouldn't hurt to be prudent …

He decided to follow the man, just in case. The guy's huge stride was difficult for Thomas to follow without breaking out into a light run, though at the same time it was nearly impossible to lose him in the crowd. Thomas was also in his casual off-duty clothes, which made him look like just another citizen instead of a guard. He followed his target for a good ten minutes before it reached its destination: an old storefront with a cracked and dirty window. The suspect put a bandaged pale hand on the door and pushed it open with a slight ringing noise, then stepped inside.

Thomas looked at the store's exterior. The sign over the door caught his attention.

"Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets?" he read aloud. "Huh. I'm sure I've heard about it before …"

Erosa was by no means a small city. Even someone who had lived there his whole life would be hard-pressed to say he knew every store in town. In fact, Thomas only knew about six of them, since they were the only ones he visited regularly, and two of them were pubs. So how come he knew about *this* one? It didn't seem like the type of place he would shop at.

However, the curious guard hadn't managed to recall where he'd heard the name by the time the masked man walked out of the shop a few minutes later. It felt like the answer was on the tip of his tongue, but his thoughts came to a screeching halt when he saw that his suspect was no longer alone. A little girl with bright pink hair done up in twin pigtails and wearing old work clothes was riding on the guy's shoulders, with his neck between her legs.

"Eek!" she squealed as she fastened her grip on the tall stranger's head.

"Want off?" asked the cloaked man in a deep, clear voice.

"N-n-no! I'll be fine! It's just, uh, much higher than I thought it would be …"

"Okay."

The pair set off, walking in no particular direction. Fizzy's unease gradually lessened as Boxxy walked around and she realised this was a far smoother ride than she was expecting. Truth be told, she hadn't been expecting anything. She had just let out a 'must be nice being so tall' comment while the two were making small talk, which somehow escalated into this current situation. The gnome had no idea what caused her student to suggest this or why it was so insistent, but she'd be lying if she said she wasn't curious.

And now that she was up here, she couldn't help but feel astonished. She had been to tall places before, of course, but this was the first time she had been atop a moving one. The streets that Boxxy walked through were the same old town section of Erosa she had grown up in, but her new vantage point made everything seem fresh and exciting. Even those scary-looking adventurers that came from out of town seemed far less threatening from up here. She felt strangely safe, almost like she was a mouse riding on the back of a lion.

A metaphor that was much closer to reality than she thought.

The gnome had, however, gotten too complacent. She was leaning over to her left, trying to get a good look at the top of a passing adventurer's fancy-looking hat. Boxxy made an abrupt right turn while she was off-balance, causing her to lose her grip and slip off her perch, kicking and screaming. She was deftly caught by her student's massive hands and silently put back in her seat.

Fizzy wasn't hurt, but the embarrassment of that childish display had finally made her settle down, much to Boxxy's relief. The sideways chest had grown supple shoulders specifically to support her rump, but it feared her fidgeting might make her bump into the not-wood frame hidden beneath its disguise. It was hence a very good thing there were no further incidents for the remainder of the excursion. The horribly mismatched pair's walk lasted for about twenty minutes in total before Boxxy returned to Fizzy's storefront. It crouched low to the ground, allowing its passenger to safely hop off its neck.

"Wow! That was so much fun!" exclaimed Fizzy with a bright smile on her face. She was practically hopping in place with glee. "Well, aside from the whole … falling part … But yeah, I really needed that. Thank you so much!"

Boxxy gave her a massive thumbs up, then waved goodbye as it turned around to go on its way.

“Wait! You forgot your stuff in the shop!” the gnome called out.

The lumbering monster very nearly let out a yelp. It had been so engrossed in what it was doing that it nearly neglected the reason it came here in the first place. Strictly speaking, the whole bonding thing with Fizzy was something it decided to do on the spot after remembering a valid point Snack had brought up earlier that day. The Mimic desperately needed to work on its social skills, lest it create a situation where a memory wipe would not be sufficient.

And since Boxxy learned best by doing, it ended up just going for it when the opportunity presented itself. It was a bit risky, but it all worked out rather well. The gnome’s excellent mood was ample evidence of that. Her ‘accidental’ fall and the Mimic’s ‘timely’ catch probably scored quite a few points. It felt quite satisfied with its performance as it picked up the blue toolbox it had come here to get and set off for its current lair.

However, completely unbeknownst to the monster, Thomas the guardsman had been following it around the entire time. This wasn’t the old dog’s first stakeout, so he knew how to tail a suspect without being noticed. He honestly didn’t know what to think about that whole shoulder riding thing, but it all looked wrong from his point of view. Not only because of the creepy feeling the tall stranger gave off, but also because that pink-haired girl did not seem to notice anything was amiss.

Thomas stalked the cloaked wanderer for another quarter hour but ended up losing him when he started ducking into some alleys towards the slums. Well, that was to be expected. Those narrow, twisting paths almost seemed designed to shake off pursuers, and that shady-looking fellow was much nimbler on his feet than one might think.

The diligent guard wouldn’t be dissuaded so easily, though. Maybe he was just being a busybody, but he refused to ignore that clearly suspicious punk. When did such a person even arrive here? Thomas was sure he’d remember a conspicuous shape like that if it ever passed through the gate he was stationed at. Then again, that only accounted for one of two entrances into the city, and it wasn’t like Thomas was there all day every day. It was not

unlikely that the two just hadn't crossed paths until today's two chance meetings.

So what about this suspect of his? What sort of person was he? What was his reason for being here? And for that matter, when exactly did he show up around town? These were all very good questions, and the truth could usually be gleaned by asking those who interacted with the suspect on a daily basis.

The Mercenary Guild adamantly protected all their employees' information, so visiting them without a warrant was pointless. This courtesy also extended towards any outsourced employees they did business with. And those people were pretty damn good at doing business, so it was unlikely they'd cough up any information. At least not without an appropriately-sized bribe, but the guard disliked giving any money to those vultures unless absolutely necessary.

There were always the vendors who ran the street stalls where the masked man had stopped to buy a disturbing amount of meat. Then again, they were probably complete strangers, judging by their startled reactions when he loomed over them.

In the end, Thomas's only course of action was to question the one person who seemed even remotely close to the guy.

He retraced his steps back to Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets and stood in front of the door. He had been wracking his brains trying to remember what this place was for most of the past hour. Seeing the owner earlier helped greatly in that regard, as he was able to recall this was the only gnomish-run establishment in Erosa. The owner was supposed to be an old coot with a few screws loose, but it didn't take a leap of logic to determine the girl in question was his daughter. He could've sworn there was something else he was forgetting, but if he didn't remember it by now, it wasn't going to come to him anytime soon. So he decided to stop wasting time and enter the shop.

Ring-a-ding-ding

The interior of the store was, to put it simply, pure chaos. Random contraptions were strewn about, and there were even some loose nuts and bolts rolling around on the floor. There also appeared to be a series of dents,

scratches, and cracks all over the place. Something violent had obviously transpired here – and recently at that.

“Just a minute!” The owner’s squeaky voice came from the slightly ajar door in the corner, and the gnome showed herself shortly afterwards. “Did you forget something else, Bo– Oh! Ahem, sorry, wrong person.” Her cheerful voice turned deadpan and monotone when she lifted the goggles from her eyes and noticed the man in her store was not the one she expected.

“ … Cammy Fizzlespunk, right?”

Thomas hazarded a guess at the gnome’s name. He had been trying to remember it for a while now, but this was the closest he’d gotten. Which, judging from the gnome’s long, drawn-out sigh, had been a miss.

“Well, at least he got the initials right,” she mumbled under her breath. “The name’s Cornie Fizzlesprocket, but you can just call me Fizzy.”

“Right … sorry about that.”

“It’s okay. You humans never get my name right anyway. Well, most of you don’t, at any rate.” The gnome set down the tools in her hands, removed her gloves and goggles, and assumed her position behind the counter. “So, what can I help you with?”

“Ah, I actually wanted to inquire about the tall gentleman in the heavy cloak who was here about half an hour ago.”

The gnome’s eyes instantly narrowed to slits. “Who’s asking?”

“City guard.”

“You don’t look like no guard.”

“That’s because I’m off duty …”

“Uh-huh. Well, Mister Off Duty, if you’re not going to buy anything, then leave.”

In retrospect, he really should’ve expected this sort of treatment. He’d be suspicious too if some random old man showed up on his doorstep claiming to be a guard and asking questions. At the same time, he couldn’t just leave empty-handed, as that would mean he’d wasted most of the afternoon off on a wild goose chase.

“Look, I just want to ask a few things about the man. I don’t mean any –”

“Get out,” the gnome said coldly.

“Huh?”

Fizzy brought out a weird device from under the counter. Its main body was that of a thick metal tube, dyed black. It had a crossbow-like grip with a trigger on one end, and a short metal rod tipped with a tiny blue ball protruding from the other end. There were also a number of odd metal protrusions sticking out of it. She was holding it with two hands and pointing the rounded end directly at her rude visitor.

“But I –” stammered Thomas.

Click

The gnome flicked one of the many switches on the contraption.

Whuruururrr

Various bits and pieces on the device lit up and an audible buzzing came out of the rounded tip, accompanied by a few white sparks.

“I said out,” she repeated in a clearly threatening manner.

Thomas didn’t know what the device was, but surely even a gnome wasn’t nutty enough to attack someone in broad daylight, right? Granted, this was private property and she was technically within her rights to refuse service to anyone. But common sense dictated that violence really should not be necessary in this instance. He raised his hands in the air, trying to show he bore no hostility.

“Please calm down, ma’am. I just want to know when –”

Bzzzt

A miniature arc of electricity flew out of the device with a flash and zapped the fingertips on Thomas’s right hand, electrocuting him for 10 HP worth of damage.

“Ow!” he yelled, recoiling from the sudden jolt.

“You won’t get another warning shot,” Fizzy said, still keeping the device trained on him.

Click

VVVVVVRRRRRRRR

She turned a dial on the side, causing the thing in her arms to let out an alarming noise as miniature lightning bolts lit up the air around its front end.

"Out," she repeated. "*Now!*"

"Okay! Okay! I'm going!"

Ring-a-ding-ding

SLAM

Fizzy kept pointing the weapon at the door for several seconds to make sure the nosy bastard had indeed gone away. She flipped the little lever on the side, changing its setting from 'stun' to 'shock' and finally to 'off.' Her Lightning Thrower – an Artificer-made weapon that did exactly what its name implied – spooled down and went quiet. There was also technically the 'vaporize' setting, but Fizzy was wary of going that far. Unleashing the device's full power could kill someone or potentially break the thing for good. And right now, that second thing was not something she could allow to happen.

She stared at the Lightning Thrower solemnly, almost reverently, and ran a finger across its slightly warm chassis.

"Dad …" she muttered. "Sorry about using Zapster on a worthless guy like that. I kind of lost it when that suspicious goon started asking questions about my star pupil."

A small smile spread across her lips.

"I bet you would've loved meeting Boxxy. That guy is an enigma wrapped in a riddle with a side order of mystery, but I can tell he's a man who adores machines. He's weird, but in a good way, I think. And he's just as clever as any gnome. Heh, give him enough time – he might just grow to be cleverer than you are!"

Tears started trailing down her face.

" … than you *were*."

She hugged the weapon and began sobbing quietly.

“I miss you and Lark so much. *Sniffle* Why? Why did you have to go off on that stupid trip? Why did you have to listen to some shady merchant’s promises! *Sniffle* Idiot! So what if the store is struggling? *Huck huck* You’re far more important than this shitty dump! *Sniffle* Curse that damned snake of a man and his shitty money! *Huck huck* Moron! *Huck* Blockhead! *Huck* Stupid!”

Rory Fizzlesprocket was a Level 70 Arclight Artificer. He and his son, Lark, had left to visit the city of Monotal three weeks ago, aboard a merchant’s private caravan.

The same caravan that had reportedly been found wiped out and ransacked on the outskirts of the former city.

“Why did you have to leave me alone!”

Cornie wept as she hugged the last memento of her dearly departed father and brother. It was hardly the best use for a delicate piece of high-powered weaponry, but what choice did she have?

Those worthless humans couldn’t even bring her a body to mourn.

Part Seven

Erosa’s officials had put forth their utmost effort to keep the matter concerning a certain nun’s disappearance a secret, but that proved to be in vain. It was now eight days after that event and pretty much the entire city of Erosa knew about it: A priestess in service to Teresa had abandoned her vows, stolen a Holy Pearl from the temple, and eloped into the night with a stranger.

The cat was out of the bag. There was no way to contain the spread of such scandalous rumours once they found their way into the general populace. This worrisome information had just the right mix of fact and fantasy to make people unable to judge whether such a thing was true or not. The purported guilty party was nowhere to be seen and their innocence could not be proclaimed with confidence by the temple or the guards.

And so, rather than let them fester, the office of the city guard decided to take action. Bounty posters were made and a generous reward of 2,000 GP was offered to anyone who brought forth news that would lead to the capture of Lyo Rosetta or her accomplice, a man identified as Alden Crawford. There was also an ongoing investigation to find out who leaked this particular information, but that was little more than a token effort. Word of mouth was an extremely unreliable trail to follow.

Which was exactly what the person responsible for maliciously spreading that rumour was counting on. In fact, not only were they also the one who manufactured this now widespread untruth, but they were also the actual perpetrator behind the Holy Pearl theft that set this whole situation into motion. And this person did it all with an evil, shit-eating grin on her face. Truly a rotten piece of garbage that enjoyed watching humans flail about in their ignorance. As expected of a succubus with a monster for a master.

Xera's reasons for doing all of this were, as per usual, entirely self-serving. She'd always hated that stuck-up bitch of a Goddess called Teresa. Any succubus who knew of the deity shared her opinion. These conniving seductresses were basically the antithesis of everything that Teresa stood for; Her natural enemies, as it were. This sentiment was also echoed by pretty much all of demonkind, albeit to a lesser extent.

Kora's completely unbiased opinion, for instance, was that the Goddess symbolized by the hammer was in dire need of a good hammering, right in Her divine parts. Xera was in somewhat of an agreement, but she had far more realistic goals in mind. The only way to mess with a divine being was to shake the faith of His or Her followers, which was why she toyed with Teresa's flock at every opportunity. She would have no shortage of victims, either, as that religion encompassed the vast majority of humanity and the Lodrak Empire as a whole.

Which wasn't to say it was a monotheistic nation. The people of the Empire prayed to other Gods as well, but Teresa's religion and its influence were by far the most prominent.

So when the opportunity to screw with Her Divine Frigidness presented itself, the succubus leapt on it with truly demonic fervour. And the results were, to put it in her master's words, really tasty. Not only did she make the populace of an entire city doubt one of Teresa's clergy with a widespread

lie, but she also framed the poor nun for a crime that the demoness herself had committed. None of which would've been possible if sister Lyo hadn't gotten too horny for her own good. It was the perfect concoction that was sure to make that self-righteous deity throw a hissy fit if she found out.

That, however, was a very big 'if.'

After all, the Gods were neither omnipotent nor omniscient. They could draw power from the faith of their followers to perform miracles, but it could also be said that they were dependent on the mortals' devotion. The question regarding what would happen should a God or Goddess lose every last one of their believers had been a controversial topic among the faithful since olden times.

Would these deities simply disappear? Or would they instead be left powerless and lose their divinity? Or perhaps garnering faith was simply a way for them to enhance their already formidable power? Such secrets of the Gods were very well kept, but their behaviour throughout the centuries made one thing clear: They wanted to be worshipped. Which in turn meant that causing people to doubt them on a large scale was the best – and perhaps only – way to rattle their gilded cages.

Realistically speaking, though, Xera's careful manipulations were unlikely to catch the notice of a big shot like Teresa. She had millions of worshippers, so losing a few thousand was unlikely to make any sort of dent. It was the thought that counted though, and the succubus's machinations were enough to make her feel good about herself. And in the end, that was all that really mattered to her.

Which wasn't to say her actions didn't have some more practical benefits. Forging and spreading that rumour around served as a good smokescreen for her master's activities. Authorities wouldn't be able to look into the background of some shady adventurer with a creepy atmosphere if they were too busy reassuring the populace. Meaning not only was Xera having fun, but she was also actively improving the chances her current arrangement would last at least a bit longer.

Spreading that information was surprisingly easy, too, as humans sometimes put too much trust in their superiors. And while that trust was usually well-placed, it didn't account for a devious demoness worming her

way into their command structure and poisoning their minds. The lieutenant, in particular, had been easy enough to sway with but a shake of her hips and a kiss on the lips. He eagerly hired her as his new assistant, which put her in a good spot to obtain all sorts of sensitive information. Spreading misinformation was quite easy, too. All she had to do was plant the right suggestion in the right head through her Dreamweaver Skill and watch the mortals flail around in their ignorance as they tried to work them out.

After all, the greatest misunderstandings were those that men arrived at seemingly on their own.

The temples were, unfortunately, less prone to supernatural manipulation. Sneaking into the building while pretending to be an out-of-town nun on a pilgrimage and absconding with one of their Holy Pearls was easy enough, but anything further than that would be ill-advised. Monks, Priests, and Paladins had Skills that fortified them against mental attacks, as well as the power to cleanse such afflictions from others or themselves.

That wasn't to say these holy men and women hated demons for wanting to spread misery, death, and destruction. That was like hating a fire for spreading in the woods or resenting the rain for causing a flood. The servants of the Gods were naturally wary of unbound demons or those ordered to commit atrocities, but then again, so was everyone else. It was considered just another misuse of magical power, and a summoner was considered responsible for crimes carried out by their familiar.

However, it was worth noting that the vast majority of such incidents were caused by ignorance rather than malice. Most Warlocks that chose to use the power of a contracted demonic entity did so with well-meaning intentions. It was hard to deny that one could do great things if they correctly applied their familiars' abilities, but keeping a tight leash on a demon was harder than it sounded.

That was why many Warlocks opted to use beholders and hellhounds as their primary contracted servants. Fiends and stalkers were more impactful when it came to combat but also much more difficult to keep in check – and far more dangerous should they be allowed to roam free. As for succubi, although their offensive magic was definitely potent, it was also technically their secondary feature.

Suffice it to say that any adventurer who had one of these temptresses under their command would face a lot of ridicule and suspicion almost by default.

All things considered though, the number of people who opted to go the route of ‘demon tamers’ was relatively small, accounting for barely a fifth of all Warlocks. Most of them opted for the safer route of honing their arcane might and ruinous magic, which did not lose out to other Caster Jobs. As for the ones who opted for the riskier – and potentially more powerful – method of relying on demonic power, they were … tolerated. Some of them were even recognized and lauded for their abilities to control their familiars to a fine degree.

Which was the exact opposite of what Boxxy did. The Mimic pretty much let its demons do as they pleased so long as they produced results and didn’t inconvenience it. Its entire stance on the ethical ramifications of using malignant extra-dimensional entities could be summed up as such:

“Responsibility? Guilt? What are those? Are they tasty? … They’re not? Then I don’t need them. Go bring me tasty things!”

This sort of careless outlook was why the shapeshifter continued its daily routine over the past week, wilfully ignorant of the civil unrest its demons were causing.

It began each morning by visiting the Mercenary Guild with the express purpose of taking on new Quests or turning in finished ones for profit. After concluding its business there, Boxxy would then move on to practising its Artisan Job, either by itself or by taking lessons from Fizzy. So far it had made a plethora of mechanical contraptions that relied on Clockwork Expertise, such as a few dozen retractable blades of varying quality, twenty-five hand-sized clocks, two basic repeating crossbows, several ‘pick proof’ combination locks, and a disturbingly high number of music box toys.

Selling these mechanical wonders proved to be remarkably easy, especially when it came to the better-than-average door locks or the plainly entertaining music boxes. These sales were the point where Boxxy was finally able to recover a more sizable chunk of the money spent on parts, but it was still suffering a steady loss.

It was worth it, however. The Mimic’s Artificer Job had gone all the way to Level 12, which also unlocked the next Skill in the series: Explosives

Handling. Flashbangs and dynamite were the basic explosives that could be made based on this Skill alone, but when combined with Clockwork Expertise, the Artificer could also give birth to several nasty surprises. Time-delayed explosives, pressure-activated landmines, and tripwire bombs were all within reach. There was even an evolution of the Bladeblossom called the Bladeboom. It worked much the same way as the original, only it used the power of Blast Powder rather than springs to form a rudimentary fragmentation grenade.

But even though Boxxy was improving steadily as an Artificer, its Warlock Job was still stuck at Level 25 and would stay that way for a while by the look of things.

There existed two methods for raising the Level cap of a 'people Job.' The first, easiest, and most commonly used method was to find a suitable teacher. For example, in order to become a Level 1 Artificer, Boxxy had to find an Artificer that was at least Level 25 and had the Mentor Skill. This was a general-access Skill that anyone could acquire with enough time and practice, which facilitated training and teaching in all their forms. It was also mandatory if one hoped to pass on their Jobs to others.

Fizzy was overqualified for this position, but that wasn't a bad thing. Since she was a Level 56 Arclight Artificer, she could also break the Level 25 limit on Boxxy's tinkerer Job, provided her Mentor Skill reached Level 4 by that point. One would then need to find a Level 75 teacher with a Level 7 Mentor Skill to break past 50, and a Level 100 teacher with a Level 10 Mentor Skill to progress above Level 75.

In other words, the Mimic had to find the appropriate Warlock trainer if it wanted to further its only Spell-slinging Job. And therein lay the problem. The vast majority of combat-oriented Job trainers all belonged to one guild or another and refused to teach anyone who wasn't part of their organization. And joining such an organization meant undergoing a Full Appraisal to verify one's capabilities by revealing their Status. Needless to say, they would immediately reject Boxxy's application when they found out it was a monster in disguise.

The other method for furthering one's Job was much more difficult and was known simply as a Breakthrough. In order to accomplish this, an individual had to diligently train all of that Job's unlocked Skills until they reached the

maximum Level 10. A stringent and rigorous training regime would be necessary to achieve such a feat and attempting this path was likely to take months, maybe even years, of hard work. There was also the hidden caveat that, while Levelling these Skills, it was highly unlikely for an adventurer to progress in Job Levels, leaving them in a bit of a rut.

These things made many people shy away from such a path. Why would they spend an exorbitant amount of time like that on something easily achieved in an afternoon with the help of a trainer and a sack of gold? Even if achieving a Breakthrough awarded a Perk that boosted XP and Skill Proficiency for the related Job by 10%, that was little more than a consolation prize. An adventurer would simply grow faster if they sought out a Mentor, which was why this approach was reserved only for those who couldn't find a trainer or were unable to muster the fee.

Thus, at least for the moment, Boxxy's Warlock Job was stuck at Level 25. Rather than obsess about it, the Mimic decided to turn its attention towards improving the things it could. The Artificer Job was progressing steadily but seemed to require slightly more expensive components as time went on. Fizzy herself confirmed that the necessary raw material costs would steadily climb due to the scarcity or difficulty of obtaining those substances. Even with the discounts she gave her 'star pupil,' it still proved to be a considerable strain on Boxxy's wallet, and showed no sign of letting up.

At least, not until Boxxy decided it had had enough and cashed in on its 'investment.'

In the meantime, however, its Mimic Job had actually stagnated for a while. Boxxy had spent perhaps too much time focusing on widgets and gadgets and not enough on murdering the crap out of things. Both that and its immediate monetary concerns could be solved by completing Quests via the Mercenary Guild. Which was why the monster was currently out here in the Whispering Marshes south of Erosa in the middle of the night.

The area was a wide, depressing swampland that had formed as a result of the Whispering Canal's sprawling delta. The deep and narrow river became shallow and wide and split up into dozens of outlets as it approached the ocean. As a result, the entire place was perpetually wet, overgrown with reeds and tall grass, and always seemed to have a thick mist that limited visibility. The two main gripes adventurers had with it, however, was that it

smelled horrible and hid several annoying species of monsters. The former wasn't particularly a problem for a chest with no innate sense of smell, and the latter was the main reason it was here in the first place.

The Mimic scuttled along slowly across the muddy ground, using Stealth to minimize its presence. Its normally narrow spider legs were uncharacteristically tipped with small disks that increased their surface area and prevented the monster from sinking into the soft mud. It then suddenly stopped, planted all eight of its legs firmly on the ground and – for lack of a better term – crouched.

The slender black limbs then uncoiled suddenly as Boxxy leapt up into the air, reaching a height of about three metres. The spidery appendages on its side disappeared back inside its body and four long, narrow metal rods with pointed ends popped out from its underside. It fell like a brick into a nearby puddle, driving the four oversized nails deep into the ground with a splash, a squish, and a crunch.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 350% more damage. Target HP -253.]
[Proficiency level increased. Assassination is now Level 8. AGI +2. DEX +1. STR +1.]

The puddle the Mimic landed in erupted as a gigantic three-metre-long grey lobster emerged. It thrashed about wildly, trying to shake off the stubborn box that had nailed itself to its back. But it couldn't because Boxxy had already expanded the tips of its makeshift spears to form something akin to fishhooks. It had already firmly anchored itself to the raging crustacean's backside. Its unwilling mount attempted to reach back and pry the damnable box out of its back, but its long, powerful pincers simply could not bend back that far.

Boxxy opened its jaw and produced two fleshy tendrils wrapped around its favourite shiny things: a pair of mithril daggers. It swung them downwards in a wide arc, easily penetrating the invertebrate monster's outer shell and gouging out its flesh.

[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -84.]
[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -103.]

Yet despite driving them down to the hilt, its attack was still considered a *minor* stab wound. Relatively speaking, poking something this large with daggers was like stabbing a person with a nail. It would take far more than two strikes to bring down a creature that, based on the shapeshifter's previous experiences, had around 1,500 HP on average. Which was why the Mimic withdrew its daggers and struck again and again.

[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -136.]
[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -122.]

Boxxy's assault would do a lot more damage if it could hit anything vital like a heart, neck, lung or skull, but its current position meant it could only strike at muscle and meat. Then there was the fact that these things seemed to have some sort of defences which greatly reduced physical damage taken. It was probably due to their combination of passive Skills not too dissimilar to the Mimic's Natural Armour.

[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -92.]
[You have inflicted a minor scratch. Target HP -13.]

The oversized lobster didn't exactly sit still and let itself be stabbed to death, either. It thrashed about wildly, even going as far as rolling across the ground, which caused some of the thrusting attacks to veer off course and end up as glancing blows. That was just an unintended side effect though, as what the crabby crustacean was trying to do was shake its attacker off its blind spot. Unfortunately, its efforts only made things worse as it inadvertently drove the stubborn chest's steel legs deeper inside itself. Being squished against mud or submerged in water was not nearly enough to discourage a dangerous mimic of Boxxy's calibre, which just kept relentlessly stinging its prey.

[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -115.]
[You have inflicted a minor stab wound. Target HP -87.]

Growing desperate, the lobster reared up and threw its head back and sprayed a shower of corrosive acid into the air. The deep green liquid then promptly rained down atop the violent monster currently attached to the invertebrate's back. But Boxxy had already taken countermeasures in the form of a large, rectangular bronze shield retrieved from its Storage. Bronze was a metal that, although not extremely tough, was naturally resistant to

magic. And this particular shield had a special anti-corrosive coating applied to its surface, courtesy of the local Alchemist. The specialized piece of gear blocked most of the acidic deluge, but some of it still splashed onto the Mimic's body, melting parts of its flesh.

[You have been burned by acid. HP -124.]

Boxxy's prey, however, seemed to be completely unfazed by this. Its own corrosive spit simply washed over its grey shell as if it were water, but the relentless barrage of stab wounds didn't slow down one bit. So it kept spewing acid all over itself as much as it could. What ensued was a frantic contest of endurance between two monsters. One just kept stabbing relentlessly while the other tried to flush it out with caustic fluids.

This carried on for almost a full minute before the large crustacean's four legs finally gave out. It collapsed in the shallow waters of the marsh, its green blood flowing freely from the countless holes in its lifeless body. The Mimic had no room to celebrate its victory, however, and quickly retreated from the body. The spot where it had been mere moments ago was then bathed in streams of acid that shot out from beneath the surface of the murky waters surrounding the fresh corpse.

Such an attack might have worked against a less prepared monster, but this one came armed with a magical perception field twenty metres in diameter. The Mimic didn't rely on simple eyesight to watch out for ambushes, so sneaking up on it was pretty much impossible. It was ironic that a monster which instinctively relied on deception and camouflage was so well equipped to deal with enemies that used the same approach.

Boxxy skittered away from the scene with all due haste. It was confident it could take down one of those things in open combat. A two-on-one was also doable if it put its Warlock Job to work, although that would mean less XP would go towards the Mimic Job. Four of those, though? That was simply too much. It was far better to apply hit and run tactics when fighting this particular species of monster, at least in Boxxy's personal opinion. Granted, that meant it would take a while to fulfil the quota for its current Quest, but that wasn't a problem since there was no time limit involved anyway.

Slay 20 Murk Dwellers
Description: The population of Murk Dwellers that inhabit the marshes to

the south of Erosa has increased to an unacceptable degree. Lord-Mayor Osorlov has commanded that these creatures be reduced in number to ensure they do not endanger the surrounding area.
Difficulty: ★★★
Deposit: 50 GP
Reward: 400 GP
Progress: 7/20

The Mimic could take the slow and easy route, though that was by no means its only method of fighting. It still had a number of special surprises waiting inside its Storage, and Snack was currently circling overhead to provide magical support if needed. It didn't want to use either of those options unless necessary. Killing a murk dweller and then escaping its inevitable backup was easy enough since they were horrible runners and had no chance of catching the highly adaptable spider-chest. The succubus was there just in case something unexpected popped up.

RUMBLE

SKREEEK

And judging from that racket coming from the thick mist behind the Mimic, something did indeed pop up. Although Boxxy would be hard-pressed to call that unexpected considering it was already looking for one of those anyway.

Slay 1 Murk Dweller Queen
Description: The population of Murk Dwellers that inhabit the marshes to the south of Erosa has increased to an unacceptable degree. Lord-Mayor Osorlov has commanded that the source of this problem be culled in order to ensure the stability of the region.
Difficulty: ★★★★★
Deposit: 50 GP
Reward: 900 GP
Progress: 0/1

Part Eight

The murk dweller queen was about the size and shape of a two-story peasant house, with an appearance closer to that of a crab than a lobster. Her shell was much harder than the common variety and one swipe of her massive claws would probably crush a civilian into paste. The related Quest's relatively high five-star rating was well deserved, though it wasn't because of the monster's strength. Although formidable in and of itself, the queen's personal might alone was enough to classify her as a four-star target.

In reality, it was her swarm of escorts that helped bump the threat assessment to the next level.

SKREEK

The towering behemoth let out another screech that echoed through the marshes, causing every murk dweller in the vicinity to stir and wake up. Dozens of them popped up out of the ground and started converging on the intruder that dared to threaten their mother. The sheer numerical advantage they had made it easy to see why the local guilds deemed this to be a Level 100 threat.

So then why did a creature that was a Level 39 Mimic, Level 25 Warlock, and Level 12 Artificer willingly set off on such a Quest? Because it had a way of levelling the playing field, of course. But first, it had to make some preparations before the queen's disgruntled subjects tracked it down. The thick fog wouldn't help hide it though. These murk dwellers seemed to have some way of locating their quarry that wasn't reliant on sight, as evidenced by how the first wave of them was already rapidly approaching.

Boxxy had already accounted for that and was confident it could manage as long as they were bunched up. It opened its Storage and retrieved the apple-sized, twelve-sided Spell Crystal it had prepared in advance. It was a good thing that a queen showed up so soon or it would have wasted a focusing crystal. Those things had a cost of 120 GP each, and it didn't feel like wasting that money by letting the Spell Crystal expire. Thankfully, the Level 5 Crystallize Magic Skill afforded it a generous thirty-minute window in which to use it, which had proven to be enough.

SKREEE

However, it didn't look like Queenie was wasting any time either. The Mimic carefully tracked the stupidly tall and oddly spherical shadow through the fog with its catlike eyes. It didn't sound like much, but that was an impressive feat considering the near pitch-blackness of this marsh during cloudy nights like this one.

Thankfully, becoming an Artificer had given Boxxy access to the Perception (PER) Attribute, which helped sharpen its senses. This applied both to the eyesight it had copied from the janther and the magical perception field it was born with – the latter of which had been extremely handy in finding the submerged or buried murk dwellers. The semi-solid soil around these parts was quite 'noisy' and 'fuzzy,' so it wasn't easy to pick out a slumbering monster in the middle of all that. Boxxy didn't have anywhere near enough PER to completely overcome that problem, but it certainly helped.

Right now, however, its natural senses were telling it about a pissed off gigantic crab that was rapidly approaching, prompting the spider-chest to break out into a run. It took a moment to reach into its Storage and take out one more thing: a flare launcher similar to the one the sweeper subjugation group tried to use about a month ago. It used the flesh tendrils spilling out of its mouth to aim it at the sky and trigger it, sending a bright red light screaming into the sky.

"Snack! Arms! Come to me!" it commanded telepathically.

"Yes, Master."

"On my way, boss!"

Kora had been ordered to stay about half a kilometre away since she was the complete opposite of subtle. Having her around would've made it more difficult to pounce on the sleeping monsters, but that was no longer a concern. The size of her stride and her absurd physical conditioning meant she would reach Boxxy pretty quickly anyway. As for Xera, she swooped in from above not two seconds after being called and glided along the ground on her demonic wings, just above the Mimic. It was a good thing her moronic master remembered to send that signal or she would've never found it in this fog.

“Snack, take the sucky thing and use it! Make sure you get all the small crabbies!”

Boxxy stretched out its tongue and handed the pitch-black Spell Crystal to its familiar. The succubus grabbed hold of it, and a rather troubling twinkle appeared in her eye.

“Do not get caught by the sucky thing! I will need your magic for the next part!”

Her Master still wasn’t completely sure about the nature of her eccentricities, but it had already noticed how … enthusiastic she got whenever she handled items of great destructive power.

“ … Yes, Master,” she replied, with a hint of disappointment.

The succubus gave her wings a few powerful beats and ascended into the night sky, dyed red by the flare’s light bouncing off the thick fog. She was able to easily see the massive shadow of the murk dweller queen pass under her. The gigantic monster had no trouble keeping up with the agile spider-chest due to her massive gait, but her brood was slow and trailed behind their mother in a tight-knit group. Xera wasn’t sure exactly how many of them had gathered by now or whether the item she was given would be enough to catch them all, but orders were orders.

“Master, I’m going!”

“Okay.”

“Banana,” she chanted.

The pitch-black Spell Crystal in her hands shimmered slightly in response to the keyword, indicating it had been properly armed.

“1 … 2 … Now!”

She let the item drop from her hands and then rapidly ascended. The crystallized form of the Mimic’s Singularity Spell fell silently through the night sky. It landed squarely on top of the large queen, instantly shattering open and releasing its contents: a miniature black hole created through Ruin magic.

The mud, the water, even the very air, got dragged towards a singular point. The murk dwellers following their mother unwittingly entered its effective

range and began floating helplessly up into the air. Even the gigantic queen was unable to break away from the sudden gravitational pull and had to resort to digging her massive feet and claws into the mud in an effort to avoid being swept away. Some of her offspring did the same, but the vast majority of them floated upwards and coalesced into one gigantic ball of floating crayfish. Since the Singularity Spell Crystal's point of impact was right next to the queen's upper shell, it almost seemed like the giant crab had an afro made out of smaller crabs.

Boxxy was also not exempt from the effects of its own Spell. The distance between itself and the point of impact was only sixteen metres, mostly due to the sheer size of its target, while the Singularity had an effective radius of over twenty. Twenty-two to be precise, what with the 10% area effect radius bonus from its Collateral Damage Perk. Either way, the Singularity's pull wasn't anywhere near as powerful this far out, allowing Boxxy to avoid getting caught up in it by clinging desperately to the ground.

However, while Xera did indeed manage to hit the vast majority of the 'crabbies' with the 'sucky thing,' none of them were actually dying. Oh sure, the ones at the very centre of the floating lobster sphere were getting crushed under the weight of their kin, but the majority of them were left unharmed. The Singularity Spell did not do much in terms of damage. That was fine though, as it had brilliantly done its job of grouping up and restraining those murk dwellers after the Mimic rounded them all up.

All things considered, the first part of Boxxy's plan had been a great success.

As for the second bit, that was far simpler. All the shapeshifter needed to do was open its Storage wide and let a series of eight brown cloth satchels fall out of it. The Singularity caught the lightweight hemp bags the instant they left the pocket dimension and swept them up into the air. They flew off and got lost somewhere inside the floating mass of angry crustaceans. They slapped against the writhing murk dwellers and slipped into the gaps between them as they were pulled ever upwards by the unnatural gravity source. They would probably reach the middle of that soggy mess if given enough time, but that wasn't something Boxxy had. Not only was the Singularity about to dissipate, but the Mimic couldn't afford to let its nasty surprises get too wet.

“Snack! Light it up!”

Xera had, as instructed, managed to fly beyond the range of the Singularity in time and avoided getting sucked into that angry mess beneath her. She hovered just on the edge of the Singularity’s range and pointed her staff downward, chanting her favourite Spell.

“Inferno!”

The towering pillar of magical fire illuminated the night and enwrapped the entire floating ball-o-crab. It clung to the monsters’ bodies, continuing to burn away at them. However, while it had been an effective area attack, it wasn’t nearly enough to kill all the monsters. Nor was that the Spell’s intended purpose.

KABO-BO-BO-BOOOOOOOM

The numerous Blast Powder explosives packed inside the cloth satchels were set off almost simultaneously. The already large mass of fire that was Xera’s Inferno expanded to become an even larger fireball as a slew of murk dwellers were ripped to shreds by both the shock waves and the shrapnel. The sheer force of the explosion sent charred lobster bits and green, sticky blood scattering in every direction, although only briefly. The strength of the Singularity’s gravity field quickly pulled everything back together.

Boxxy’s mind was once again flooded by what seemed to be hundreds of damage notifications, but it ignored them and focused only on the important one at the end.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 40 Mimic! All Attributes +2.]

SKREEEEEEEEE

As for the queen, she was not entirely pleased with this development. Not only did that series of explosions hurt like nothing else she had ever experienced, but they also did a number on her brood. The shell protecting her upper body was mostly in pieces, and the succubus’s magical flames still clung to her.

“Snack, finish off the crabbies, I’ll get the big one!”

“Yes, Master.”

The Singularity’s effects ran out a few seconds later, releasing both the queen and the few surviving murk dwellers from their magical prison. The massive monster angrily swung a claw downwards, aiming at the one who was undoubtedly responsible for all this – that infuriating half-spider, half-box, half … human?

“Mind Blast ~♪!”

[Your target has been stunned for 3 seconds.]

The massive crab recoiled and wavered mightily as the Domination Spell assaulted her consciousness. Her claw strike missed her target by a wide margin, striking nothing but soggy swampland.

“Frostbite ~♪!”

Six icy fangs flew out from Boxxy’s sides, three from the left, and another trio from the right. They drew unnatural horizontal arcs as they flew through the air, almost as if someone had thrown a bunch of boomerangs. They struck the queen’s vulnerable upper body from both sides like a pair of icy jaws.

[Your target has been pierced by the magical ice. Target HP -319.]

Granted, they didn’t do much. That big-ass monster was sure to have mountains of HP at its disposal and barely even flinched. The size difference between her body and the icy fangs was like prodding a person with a toothpick.

“Frostbite ~♪!”

That was fine, however, as Boxxy could fire off as many of the fangs as necessary. This Spell was one of the more efficient ones in the Mimic’s limited repertoire. Its damage was comparable to a Dark Explosion, at only a fraction of the MP cost. The chant was also really short and could be completed even faster than a Shadowbolt.

[Your target has been pierced by the magical ice. Target HP -319.]

The only problem was that it was really hard to aim. The odd path the projectiles took, as well as their relatively slow speed, made it substantially difficult to hit a human-sized opponent with the full force of the Spell. And

that was only if they were standing still. Hitting a moving target with this thing was downright impossible. That wasn't a problem right now though. Not only was Boxxy's victim as big as a barn, but it had also been immobilized by magic.

"Frostbite ~♪!"

Therefore, the monster kept barraging it with icicles, though not without restraint. This stupidly huge thing was bound to have HP for days, so the Mimic was pacing its MP reserves for once. It was in it for the long haul, which was why it abstained from using Power Overwhelming.

[Your target has been pierced by the magical ice. Target HP -319.]

The third set of projectiles hit true, but it appeared that was the last one. The queen was beginning to move around again, a clear indication she had recovered from the same Spell that Boxxy was currently chanting.

"Mind Blast ~♪!"

[Your target has been stunned for 2 seconds.]

The towering crustacean went limp again and sank into the soggy swamp as its consciousness was severed once more. Pitch-black flames then poured out of her shell as the monstrous Warlock unleashed an Ebonfire Spell, followed closely by another Frostbite. Xera landed on the ground next to her master and unleashed a Pyromancer's Magma Missile. Globs of molten rock launched themselves out of the ground with gusts of steam and smoke, drawing large arcs through the air before splattering across the queen's face.

SKREEEEOOOK

She definitely felt those last ones, but it looked like she'd already recovered from the Mind Blast. She ignored the Ebonfire engulfing her and raised a claw, preparing to take out both Boxxy and Xera with a single swing.

"Mind Blast ~♪!"

[Your target has resisted the Spell.]

The Mimic tried to stop her, but it was no good. This opponent's mind had already sealed itself off due to the repeated assault and it would take time before Domination Spell would be effective again. This had happened much

sooner than anticipated, leaving Boxxy wide open to the giant monster's pincer swipe.

The shapeshifter wasn't worried though because its backup had finally arrived.

"OOORRRAAAA!" yelled Kora as she leapt into the path of that wide swing.

The crab's claw slammed into her double cross-arm block. It was a heavy blow as expected, but fiends were no pushovers. Kora grit her teeth, tensed every muscle in her body, and stood firm. Her powerful legs dug two narrow trenches into the soft ground as she was pushed back for about a metre, but she still stopped. She had successfully blocked a monster that was easily three times taller than she was. She hit the claw away with a double straight punch that left a sizable dent in the limb's hard shell. The queen lost her balance and stumbled backwards, buying the trio a few seconds of time.

It was a good thing Boxxy didn't have much in the way of common sense; otherwise, it might have been too shocked by that ridiculous display to take advantage of the opening.

"Snack – crabbies?" it asked.

"Dead, Master. This is the last one."

"What do I do, boss?" Kora asked with a hint of anticipation.

Her master responded to her query by bonking her lightly on the head with the staff that its Xera-shaped upper body was still holding.

"Huh?" the fiend blurted in confusion.

"Dark Infusion ~♪!"

"Ohhhh, there we go!"

Kora let out a gasp of pleasant surprise as Boxxy's Spell took hold of her. A dark, malicious aura enveloped her body, causing it to overflow with power.

"Kill it," it commanded.

"Fuck yeah! Grit your teeth, Crabzilla, 'cuz you about to get wrecked!"

She coiled her legs and leapt at the towering queen's upper half. Her well-toned body did a half spin in the air, allowing her to plant a fierce dropkick right between the monster's eye stalks. The toothy smile on the fiend's face was so wide it almost looked like her lower jaw was about to fall off.

It was only natural Kora would be ecstatic. It wasn't every day she got to fight an opponent bigger than herself, and she even got a dose of her favourite power-up to boot. This was the first thing resembling a challenge she had gotten after two weeks of babysitting that ruin of a warehouse, which made this encounter even tastier.

"Snack, support her."

"Understood. What will you do, Master?"

Boxxy's imitation of Xera disappeared and three tongues holding daggers took its place. Its MP reserves were already nearly dry, as even the most efficient of the Warlock's Spells was quite demanding.

"I'm killing it," it answered simply.

The harrowing battle that followed seemed like one without end. Not only did the queen appear to have nearly bottomless HP, but it was supported by many defensive Skills. She also started spewing a rain of acid once her mouth and face had recovered enough halfway through the fight. Boxxy and Xera were able to avoid it relatively easily, but Kora was caught up in it since she was at point-blank range. She survived the corrosive deluge but had to activate Demonic Carapace to lessen the damage and Second Wind to recover from it. The Mimic then took it upon itself to pull her away from subsequent acidic geysers whenever it noticed its target was preparing to fire another one.

Xera mostly circled around out of harm's way while pelting the monster with magic whenever she could. She also had to use the Purge Spell on the other two several times after the queen released poisonous clouds around her. Her newly-acquired Magma Missile Spell seemed quite effective, but she had to land on the ground to use it. A spray of acid from a stray murk dweller blindsided her when she was doing so. The attack didn't kill her outright but cost her the use of her wings, which drastically reduced her mobility. She was crushed under the queen's claw a few seconds later.

As for Boxxy, it alternated between bombarding the massive monster with magic from afar and crawling all over it while stabbing away at her flesh. It even threw the last remaining bombs it had inside some of the deeper wounds, but their effect was minimal. As the fight dragged on, it altered its tactics, opting to cast Delirium whenever there was an opportunity to use Domination magic. The auditory and visual hallucinations that Spell caused made the confused creature attack thin air, though its random swipes did sometimes veer towards its enemies. All things considered, it was far safer to knock the thing out with Mind Blast, but the effects of Delirium lasted two to three times longer. The fight had been lengthier than the Mimic expected, which was why it had gone for the tactic that better reduced the overall risk involved.

Which was probably the right call, as the murk dweller queen did not go down easy. Members of her stray brood kept popping up every now and then as they were drawn in by its wailing, pulling either Boxxy or Kora away from the big one so they could deal with the new threats. At one point the murky water around the giant crab's feet rose up in the air and splashed against its countless wounds, closing them up and restoring a significant portion of its vitality.

Yet Boxxy refused to give up. Dodging all those claw strikes, poisonous fumes, and acidic rain was nerve-wracking, but its opponent failed to land any clean hits on the spry box. It clipped it more than a few times, but it would take a lot more than that to scare off the Mimic. It had used up a small fortune on the explosives, so it refused to leave until it had gotten its money back by slaughtering this lumbering pile of meat.

The vicious chest's perseverance eventually paid off. In a blind rage befitting that of a Berserker, Arms managed to rip off a piece of the queen's battered and beaten shell. Boxxy seized the opportunity and leapt at the exposed muscle. It covered itself with sharp edges via Metal Mimicry and burrowed into it like the world's deadliest tick, carving and ripping huge parts out of the thing's side. The boss monster let out a series of pained screeches before finally keeling over sideways and collapsing on the ground, lifeless.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 41 Mimic! All Attributes +2.]

“YESSHAAAAA!”

Boxxy let out a triumphant half-scream, half-roar as it burrowed its way out of its victim’s insides. Its spider legs moved to an unheard rhythm as it danced a dance of triumphant joy on top of its defeated foe. That five-star difficulty rating hadn’t been for show, as it had taken over ten minutes and precisely 1,065 GP’s worth of potions, explosives, and other supplies to bring the queen down. The Mimic would eventually be disgruntled at how it spent more money than it would make off its corpse, but right now it was too busy savouring the rush of victory.

It wasn’t the only one.

“Huff! Huff!” Kora panted as she leaned against the gigantic carcass. “Huff! Yeah! Take that! Huff! Fucking crab! Huff! Showed you who’s boss! Huff! Huff!”

The fiend was acting tough, but she was barely clinging to life. Both of her left arms had been melted away by the acid. Chunks of her body were also missing, particularly around the upper body and thighs. She’d have bled out or succumbed to the agonizing pain coursing through her body ages ago if she wasn’t a demon. The fact that she was still able to trash talk the dead creature was nothing short of a testament to the fiend’s resilience and stubbornness.

Boxxy didn’t get out of the fight entirely unscathed either. It took its fair amount of punishment as well but was able to pull through splendidly thanks to the incredibly delicious Skill it managed to unlock mid-battle.

[Mend Flesh]
A shapeshifter’s mastery over their body affords them a uniquely deep vitality.
Requirements: Level 40 Monster Job, Shapeshift, INT 150
Type: Toggled (ON)
Activation Time: N/A
Cost: N/A
Range: Self
[Effects]
Restores missing vitality at a rate of 100 HP/sec.
Consumes 100 MP for every 100 HP restored by this Skill.

Reduces the MP consumption of this Skill by 3% per Level of the Shapeshift Skill.
Increases the HP recovery rate of this Skill by 10 HP/sec per Level of this Skill.

This appeared to be the same ability the Fleshmaiden dungeon master near Monotal used to keep herself alive despite losing sizable chunks of her body to the Mimic's attacks. Needless to say, this Skill made Boxxy's survivability shoot through the roof. It was honestly like a dream come true. No longer would it have to rely on potions or dodging attacks like crazy in order to pull through gruelling fights. Or so it thought until it got a bit cocky when it took one of the queen's acid splashes head on and lost about 850 HP in an instant. It had to quickly drink three of its more expensive potions to get its health back to a safe level, needlessly wasting resources due to its own hubris.

But that was then, this was now. And the Boxxy right now had one thing on its mind: dinner. The Mimic opened its maw wide and started chowing down on the mountain of fresh meat underneath it. And it was truly tasty, for it was the flavour of victory. It crunched and munched at the corpse, burrowing in deeper and deeper like some sort of flesh-eating parasite.

Almost exactly like that, actually.

Once it had eaten beyond its fill, it let out a satisfied burp. Tonight was a truly splendid night. Could it even get any better? Of course it could. There was still that one thing that would make this a perfect evening.

"Kadahah Akhsohsohn!" it chanted, full of anticipation.

Countless purple tendrils shot out in all directions, embedding themselves inside the walls of flesh and blood around it. The mountainous body shrivelled up at truly frightening speeds over the next two seconds as Boxxy's Skill greedily slurped it up. When it ended, all that was left behind was a haystack-sized pile of soggy ash –

[Your Cadaver Absorption has failed.]

– combined with a feeling of profound disappointment.

Boxxy really needed to stop getting its hopes up like that.

[General Information]
Boxxy T. Morningwood
Mimic (Greater), Genderless, 3 months old
Level 41.23 Mimic
Level 25.00 Warlock (MAX)
Level 12.53 Artificer
1449/1449 HP (+3.7/sec)
503/1165 MP (+1.9/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 184, DEX 225, AGI 174, END 253, INT 233, WIS 194, LCK 83, MNT 150, CHR 60, PER 52

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination - Lvl 8.13
Storage - Lvl 7.23
Cadaver Absorption - Lvl 6.65
Biomass - Lvl 5.97
Natural Armour - Lvl 6.72
Metal Mimicry - Lvl 4.53
Mend Flesh - Lvl 2.40
[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar - Lvl 7.87
Power Overwhelming - Lvl 6.75
Demonology - Lvl 6.27
Crystallize Magic - Lvl 5.70
[Artificer Skills]
Clockwork Expertise - Lvl 3.85
Explosives Handling - Lvl 2.10
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift - Lvl 8.36
Stealth - Lvl 7.43
Sword Mastery - Lvl 6.65
Projectile Mastery - Lvl 5.01
Dagger Mastery - Lvl 8.33
Ruin Mastery - Lvl 8.41

Domination Mastery - Lvl 6.24
Shield Mastery - Lvl 3.68

[Spell List]
Ruin - Shadowbolt, Ebonfire, Frostbite, Dark Explosion, Shadowbind, Singularity
Domination - Mass Panic, Delirium, Dark Infusion, Mind Blast

Part Nine

Rather than being discouraged at how unreliable Cadaver Absorption was proving to be, the Mimic quickly reminded itself it wouldn't even have the Warlock Job or either of its deeply useful familiars without it. The Skill provided it with the occasional Attribute boost and it had even lifted Shield Mastery off a dead adventurer. And there was that time it kick-started its Dagger Mastery free of charge. Indeed, the Skill was undeniably potent. Unreliable and random, but potent. Besides, tonight was still a pretty good night. It gained two Levels, the immensely delicious Mend Flesh Skill, and earned itself over a thousand gold pieces for completing both Quests. Therefore, the fact that Cadaver Absorption once again failed to gain anything from a powerful creature was really no big deal.

Yep.

It was fine.

Boxxy wasn't the least bit bothered by this outcome.

"HUUUUUCK!"

Okay, it was bothered. It was bothered a lot, actually. Then it realised exactly how many potions and explosives were used up during the fight and its mood got even worse. Had tonight been worth it after all? Yes, it had. Maybe not so much on the monetary side of things, but securing the ability to rapidly regenerate its HP had been a huge win. It sought solace in the fact that life would be much easier from that point on.

"Hey Boss," Kora called. "You okay?"

"Fine," answered Boxxy.

That was actually the truth. Now that both the thrill of victory and the disappointment of losing a gamble were gone, it was actually left quite … serene. Peaceful, even. Almost like –

“Ack! No sleepy!”

The Mimic shook itself vigorously. It was so tired that it almost dozed off right then and there. This place was far too dangerous to do that sort of thing, especially while exposed. Deciding it had better get a move on, Boxxy briskly walked out of the gigantic pile of black ash and started inspecting the bodies of the lesser murk dwellers. A good bunch of them had been turned to goop thanks to that explosion, but there were still quite a few of them that were mostly intact. It then started systematically using Cadaver Absorption on them, one after the other.

And was met, as expected, with a string of failures. Its fickle mood quickly started to sour once more. But it kept using the Skill on one corpse after another. Persistence was key in this sort of thing, and it wouldn’t want to waste any chance to power up. Some small part of it considered whether it should store some of the bodies for breakfast but quickly decided against it. Objectively speaking, their meat was bad. Something in their green blood made it taste considerably foul. It wasn’t poisonous, just … bad. Without the ‘taste of victory’ around to smooth things over, it really didn’t want to bother with those unless absolutely necessary.

[Your Cadaver Absorption was a moderate success!]
[16% of the target’s highest Skill Proficiency has been added to your own.]
[The body’s deteriorated condition has weakened this effect by 20%.]
[Proficiency level increased. Aci□ Spray is now Level 3. END +9. INT +9.]

“Oh!” exclaimed Boxxy.

A brand new Skill popped up out of the second-to-last corpse. Cadaver Absorption actually pulled through in the end, didn’t it? Wait, something was off about that notification. And what was this … odd sensation it felt when it absorbed it? The Mimic quickly brought up its Status window and inspected the new Skill.

Aci□ Spray
3Erȸrjfяofꟼ̛̛̛

Type: Sustained
Activation Time: 1 second
Cost: 80 MP/sec
Range: 7.999999999999994 metres
[Effects]
Emit a spray of corr̨osisisísive aci .
Increases the volume and potency of the released aci by 10% per Level of this $ḱill.

“ … Wat?”

Okay, this was new.

Actually no, it wasn’t *entirely* new. The Mimic had already seen this sort of incomprehensible gibberish and weird squiggles once before. It was back when it was using Snack as collateral to summon Punchy. Attempting to view the Overlord’s Status gave it a list of garbled nonsense that seemed eerily similar to this one. Perhaps it was somehow related? It decided to double-check just to be sure.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Beep ... Beep ... Bee–

Click

“Hello,” answered the familiar, raspy voice. “You have reached Demons ‘R’ Us. My name is Carl and I’ll be your liaison for today.”

“Hey, Carl. It’s Boxxy.”

“Oh! Good to hear from you, buddy! What can I help you with today?”

“I got this weird Skill and I need some help.”

“Is it directly related to your summoning contracts, bound familiars, the Beyond and/or eldritch abominations of terrible power?”

“… I don’t … think so?”

“Then that means it’s outside the terms and conditions of your support contract with Demons ‘R’ Us. Sorry, buddy – company policy. I’m afraid you’re on your own.”

“But I saw the same weird thing back when I had Punchy!”

“Punchy? … Oh right, Overlord Nagnamor. You … didn’t summon him again, did you?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“I think I would know if I accidentally summoned a giant fire-breathing demon who can cleave mountains, Carl.”

“ … Did you just use sarcasm on me?”

“Sarcasm? What’s that? Is it tasty?”

“Uh, never mind. What weird thing were you talking about?”

“The Skill – it’s all weird and wibbly-wobbly. Just like Punchy’s Status back then.”

“Is it? Hmm … I think I better consult my manager, please hold.”

Boop

Ah, there it was again, that oddly soothing music. Boxxy’s fascination with these tasty sounds was the reason it made so many music boxes for Artificer practice. It couldn’t quite get those toys to play a tune *this* good, though. At the very least they sold moderately well, to the point where the Mimic actually turned a profit on them. And it felt oddly happy to be making something chest-shaped for once, even if it was just a trinket.

Boop

“Sorry for the delay, Boxxy. My boss said we’d better make sure there’s no funny business going on, so he authorized me to help you out this one time as an exception. Send me your Status and I’ll take a look-see.”

“Okay. Sending.”

“Got it. And which Skill seems to be the issue?”

“It’s the Aci-square Spray.”

“… What? Do you mean Acid Spray?”

“I guess?”

“Uh-huh … One moment, please. Uh … Hmm … Oh! Yeah, okay, I think I see the issue. You got this thing through some sort of special circumstance rather than unlocking it normally, right?”

“Yes.”

“There’s your problem then. You’re trying to view the information relating to a Job or a Skill that’s outside your sphere of knowledge and understanding. That’s why it looks so messed up.”

“So … this is normal?”

“Well, I don’t know how normal it is for a mimic to have a Skill from another species, but Monster Jobs aren’t too far apart so it’s probably fine. You still understand most of it, yeah?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’d say you’re good. I’d wager the Skill’s description and whatnot should clear the more you get used to it, so I wouldn’t worry about that if I were you.”

“Okay. Wait, how come you can see it clearly?”

“Trade secret, my square friend,” Carl said playfully. “Let’s just say the operators here at Demons ‘R’ Us are very well-informed.”

“I see. Thanks Carl.”

“Hey, no problem. Glad you actually had a simple problem for once. And keep in mind, this was a one-time service because of our little arrangement, so don’t bother calling us unless you have a demon-related inquiry. Now, that said, is there anything else I can do for you today?”

“ … Yes, actually. Can I speak with Snack like I do with you?”

“Err … ”

“My familiar. With the skin and the horns. The blue one.”

“Oh, right, the succubus. Yeah, it’s possible, but she’d have to give you her soul number. And don’t *order* her to tell you her soul number, okay? That could be grounds for contract termination. Especially with succubi, they’re quite touchy when it comes to that sort of thing.”

‘Contract termination’ was a fancy way of saying that the arrangement between summoner and familiar would be made null and void. The repercussions of such an act varied on the circumstances, but generally speaking, it involved either the Warlock or the demon getting blacklisted by Demons ‘R’ Us. Such individuals would be banned from forming new summoning contracts for a period of anywhere between three months to five hundred years.

“I see. I’ll keep that in mind,” responded Boxxy.

“Why do you need to speak to her directly anyway?”

“I don’t.”

“But then … why bother asking?”

“I was just curious if I could.”

“Ah. Will that be all then?”

“Yes. Thanks, Carl. You were a big help.”

“That’s what I’m here for, buddy. Buh-bye.”

“Bye.”

Click

The Mimic double-checked its Skill List and noticed that ‘Aci□ Spray’ was now properly called ‘Acid Spray.’ It would seem those squiggles really were just a problem with its perception of the Skill. The contents of the Skill’s window were still messed up, but Boxxy’s mind already had all the relevant information it needed to spit acid just like those overgrown lobsters. So it decided to give it a try.

First, it grew the relevant acid-producing gland through shapeshifting, placing it at the tip of its tongue. It then activated the relevant Skill, causing the organ to rapidly swell with caustic fluid that appeared out of thin air. After a few moments of charging up, the monster began spewing the dangerous stuff all over the place. The liquid refused to fly farther than eight metres, though, no matter what sort of angle or how much pressure was involved. The acid just sort of evaporated instantly if it got too far away, although it did linger for several seconds if it remained within the Skill’s range.

Next, Boxxy began pushing the limits of the Skill, quickly making a few interesting discoveries. For instance, it didn't matter how large the acid gland was, where it was placed, or how many of them there were. The amount of liquid produced by Acid Spray each second would not pass a certain threshold. On the upside, it meant the Mimic could shoot jets of the nasty stuff from any part of its body so long as it shaped the necessary organ and angled it correctly.

Still, that acid was quite devastating – something the shapeshifter had experienced first-hand. Being able to use non-physical means of attack without resorting to chanting magic was quite useful, although Boxxy needed to be careful not to get splashed by its own juices. Mimics were far less acid-proof than murk dwellers, after all. Not that being injured mattered much since Mend Flesh would patch things up right away.

Having concluded its business in the marsh and – after forcefully dismissing Kora for whining about her missing limbs or some such – Boxxy made its way back to the outskirts of Erosa. It went into the city through its secret tunnel, crawled into its hideout, summoned both of its familiars for protection, and finally allowed itself to sleep.

Boxxy woke up just before noon the next day at exactly 11:34, according to its tentacle-made clock. Its weekly dose of sleep lasted for almost nine hours as per usual, after which it had woken up feeling refreshed and full of energy. It quickly donned its disguise and set about its daily routine, albeit with a late start. It took to the now familiar streets of Erosa and made a beeline for the Mercenary Guild. It found the place practically deserted, unlike at breakfast. In fact, the only ones present were the dwarven receptionist and what looked like a male elf nursing a headache in the corner.

"Ah! If it isn't the illustrious Mister Morningwood!" Grog the dwarf called out to the disguised Mimic, and the monster nodded in response.

Boxxy strode up to the bar and sat cross-legged on the floor. This put the two of them at relatively equal eye level. Sensing business was afoot, the bartender put away the notepad he was scribbling on and devoted his full attention to his visitor.

“Late night last night, eh? Ah, to be young … Anyway, what can I do for you today?”

“Quests.”

“Don’t tell me you’re giving up!”

“No. I’m done.”

“Done? You mean you already killed all those crabby bastards?”

Boxxy nodded once again.

“What, even the big one?”

Grog’s eyes nearly fell out of his skull when he saw the affirmative head movement. “But you only got that Quest yesterday!”

“Late night.”

“Hah. Hahahaha! I see, I see!”

The dwarf let out a short, hearty laugh, much to the chagrin of the elf in the corner still nursing a hangover.

“Hey!” the elf in question called out. “Keep it down, Grog! My head’s about to burst!”

“Ah, sorry Lint. It’s just that Mister Morningwood here has made me a whole lot of gold!”

“Gold?” Boxxy’s eyes shone fiercely when it heard the shiny G-word.

“Oh-hoh!” exclaimed Grog. “Now there’s a look I can relate to! Don’t worry, just a friendly wager between me and some of the lads on whether you’d make it back.”

He smiled widely, making it plainly obvious which side of the wager he had been on. There was more to his good mood than that, though. Grog’s personal opinion of the hard-working Boxxy T. Morningwood had only improved during the past week, so he was genuinely glad to see him return safe and sound. Murk dwellers were deceptively tough to handle for solo adventurers, so there’d been a very real chance even this promising newcomer might’ve been overwhelmed.

“Sure you don’t wanna sign on with the guild after all?” he offered yet again. “You’d make a lot more money if you were a full member!”

Boxxy just shook its head.

“Well, can’t blame me for trying. Anyway, let’s make the Quest completion official, shall we?”

The dwarf reached behind the counter and brought out the Quest Logger, placing the crystal orb on the bar. He then confirmed that Boxxy T. Morning did indeed complete the two Murk Dweller related Quests that had been accepted the day before. He excused himself and went into the back room to prepare Boxxy’s payment as per usual and came out with one heavy satchel and two smaller pouches.

“Here you go, Mister Morningwood,” he said, setting them down on the counter. “Please confirm the amount.”

Boxxy nodded and peeked into the bags for the sake of keeping up appearances. It had already confirmed that the 1,300 GP it was owed was present and accounted for. It was also delighted to find out that it had been given one of the so-called ‘Divine Pieces.’ Those large coins were worth 500 GP each, making them the highest denomination of currency around. More importantly, they were made out of pure mithril. Their borderline irresistible shininess made them Boxxy’s favourite form of currency by far. So much so that it had to actively fight the urge to take the coin in question out of its container and worship it. It just barely managed to hide away its earnings underneath its cloak without making a fool of itself.

“Oh, and this ... ” said the bartender, pulling out a 50 GP coin and sliding it across the counter. “ ... is for being a good sport about that bet I mentioned. I made a killing off you, so I felt it was only fair to give you a little something. No hard feelings, ey?”

“Holy shit!” screamed Lint from the corner. He got up from his seat and started running across the restaurant with his hands in the air.

“Grog’s giving away money! A storm is comiiiing!”

He then promptly ran upstairs, likely to hide under his bed covers.

“Storm? Again?” asked the Mimic with a hint of worry in its voice.

“Nah, never mind him. He’s just being overly dramatic,” the dwarf said dismissively. “Why? Do you not like the storms, Mister Morningwood?”

“No.”

‘Not like’ was an understatement. Boxxy absolutely *hated* stormy weather. It was almost as untasty as getting covered in acidic spit.

“How come?” inquired Grog.

“Thunderbolts and lightning – very very frightening.”

This was a surprisingly honest answer. Something about those loud flashes of light in the distance really put the creature on edge. Strangely enough, it wasn’t upset by Power Overwhelming in the slightest, despite the Skill covering it in a cloak of crackling energy. That aside, the rain itself caused a different problem. Having so many water droplets passing through its magical perception field confused Boxxy and made it hard to take in its surroundings. Though it wasn’t about to admit such a thing out loud. It wasn’t *that* stupid.

“Aye, nature’s fury can be a terrifying thing. That typhoon that hit us the day before yesterday was pretty bad. Reminded me of the time I got hit by lightning. Not the small sparks that Wizards and Shamans toss about. I’m talking an actual bolt from the heavens.”

“Sounds bad.”

“Oh, it was. Here, I got the scar to prove it.”

Grog took off his shirt and turned around, showing a red tree-like pattern running down his back. Boxxy didn’t even want to think about how much that must’ve hurt. It was no stranger to being injured, but painful things were painful.

“Barely made it out alive; haven’t been able to hold a sword right ever since,” claimed the dwarf as he dressed himself again. “I’ve been hit by hundreds of Spells in my youth, but none of them were this bad. Take it from me – no stick-twirling pyjama-wearing twinkle-fingers can hope to match the real deal. Though I suppose that old hag Imiryl would be an exception.”

“Imiryl? Weird name?”

“That’s because she’s this big-shot high-elf Wizard from the Ishigar Republic to the north,” Grog said as he began cleaning shot glasses. “They all have funny-sounding names up there. I wouldn’t say that to her face though. Imiryl’s supposedly one of the most powerful Spell-slingers on the continent, but also kind of a stuck up cunt. Terrible temper, too. Not the sort of gal you wanna get involved with. By the way, no offence or anything, but you seem awfully chatty today, Mister Morningwood.”

That was because the Mimic had been steadily working on its small talk over the past week, mostly with Fizzy. Word of mouth was a useful source of information according to Snack, so it wanted to make sure it wasn’t missing out. Its efforts had paid off since it found out about this dangerous-sounding woman called Imiryl. But it had a long way to go. As of right now, it couldn’t hold a conversation for long but had a solid grasp on what constituted a socially acceptable response.

Like for instance, it knew that someone behaving differently from normal could often be attributed to a shift in their mood. Therefore, all it needed to say in this situation was –

“Today – good day.”

“Heh. I’ll say. Not every day you get to pocket a thousand-plus gold, eh?”

Boxxy exchanged a few more words with Grog and left the Mercenary Guild before the conversation became too hard for it to follow. It had to admit, it was strangely fond of that dwarf. He was easy to get along with and his body and muscles were still supple despite his old age. The Mimic was looking forward to savouring his flavour. But before (or even if) such a time came, it had to restock its supplies.

Come to think of it, why was it spending all this money? Surely it could just take what it wanted, right? Now that it had Mend Flesh, couldn’t it take all those crummy guards and loot the city however it pleased? No, those were dangerous thoughts. Its MP was not bottomless, and there were plenty of adventurers around. It understood that tangling with monster-hunting experts out in the open was a terrible idea, but it still hated having to give away its shinies so quickly after getting them.

The Mimic concentrated on the Storage Skill’s mental inventory of what was currently in its pocket dimension. Its money reserves clocked in at

1,704 GP with today's payment, which was a significant sum but not nearly enough for its tastes. It had also used up most of its healing potions, but at least it wouldn't need those with Mend Flesh around. Then again, having one or two on hand to give it a burst of vitality was probably a good idea. Insurance just in case it ran out of MP in the middle of battle.

Speaking of which, shouldn't it get mana restoration potions too? Those certainly seemed like they would be a wise investment now that MP could be converted to HP. At least those were cheaper than their healing counterparts. It would probably be a good idea to look into getting some more alchemical oils for its weapons or maybe a few fortifying elixirs. Though short-lived, their magical effects could mean the difference between life and death.

Boxxy sighed deeply as it took a break from its mental arithmetic. How come earning money was so much more difficult than spending it? There had to be a better way to get its tentacles on more numerous (and shinier) shinies.

Since such a method was unlikely to make itself known out of the blue, the Mimic turned its attention to procuring those supplies. It stopped by the same elven apothecary it always visited and bought four blue-tinged potions for 95 GP each. The Alchemist claimed they filled 200 MP per dose, so they would serve very well in an emergency. Boxxy also bought two of the 300 HP potions, just in case.

Surprisingly enough, the old Alchemist gave Boxxy a discount on the healing tonics, knocking them down from 190 to 175 GP each. He even tossed in three doses of medium-grade all-purpose antidote for free. Apparently being a 'knife-eared twig' in a mostly human town made it so he didn't get many customers, so he was quite thankful for Boxxy's continued patronage. This gesture put the Mimic in a very amiable mood, as it seemed that everything was going its way today.

Next on the shopping list: explosives. They were very handy to have in a pinch and their non-magical nature made them more reliable than the Spell Crystals, though perhaps not as flexible. Boxxy walked idly towards Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets, arriving without much incident. Well, aside from having all the humans staring at it in a generally frightened manner. The Mimic was somewhat used to it by now, but that attention still worried it.

And for good reason too. Evidently, it had caught the eye of one of the city's guardsmen, who had spent a few days tailing the monster without it realising it was being followed. The guardsman had reported the cloaked stranger's suspicious activity to his superior, but Snack was able to head the issue off and wipe the relevant memories before the situation got out of hand. It was fortunate Boxxy had allowed her to infiltrate the city guard like she asked, or it might have been made the target of another punitive expedition.

There was no telling when another nosy do-gooder might interfere though, which was why Boxxy made extra sure it wasn't being followed prior to entering Fizzy's place.

Ring-a-ding-ding

The door frame hit the bell hanging above it as per usual, signalling the Mimic's entrance.

"Ack! Hey! B-Boxxy!"

Fizzy was behind the counter instead of working on her various projects in the back. At a second glance though, she did have her tools out, so it appeared she was busy as usual, only in a slightly different place.

"You're here, um, early!"

Her eyes darted between her visitor and the door in the back. Was it really early though? If anything, Boxxy had arrived later than intended since it slept in.

"Ah well, no time like the present!" squeaked the gnome. "Wait right there; I have something I want to give you! Just, just sit right there, okay?"

Boxxy nodded, and Fizzy ran into the back room. It honestly didn't mind waiting around for a bit. It was very good at waiting. In fact, it was practically an expert on the matter. One could say it was born to wait in one spot until something tasty jumped in its mouth. It wouldn't get to show off its waiting skills today though, as Fizzy returned from the back within seconds. She trotted up to the counter and climbed atop the small crate she always stood on.

"Here, this is for you!"

The gnome held out a small metal ball. It was about five centimetres in diameter and had a deep groove running around its circumference like it was two hemispheres that were bolted together. It was plated gold and there was a large button on the side. As for the interior, it was an Artificer contraption of some sort.

“It’s, uhm, a gift for, uh, for being such a great student! Yeah!”

Her behaviour struck Boxxy as a bit odd, but it wasn’t about to turn down a shiny gift. This was the third free thing it had gotten today, so it was quite elated as it reached out and snatched the metal orb from Fizzy’s hand. The gnome recoiled slightly from the sudden action, but the Mimic was far too enthralled by the shiny object it had been presented with to care about her. Even if the gold was only on the surface, that was still enough to suit its very basic tastes.

“What’s this?” it asked, brimming with curiosity.

“Like I said, it’s a gift! It’s, err, a prototype toy! Yeah! It’s super fun! Just push the button and you’ll see!”

Boxxy promptly did as instructed and pressed the switch with its thumb as Fizzy ducked behind the counter.

Click

BAZZZUZZUZUZUZUZZZT

Blue arcs of electricity shot out from the device and into Boxxy’s body.

“SKHRAAAAHHRG!”

It let out a loud, inhuman scream as the powerful current rocked it to its very core.

[You have been electrocuted. HP -258.]
[You have been stunned for 4 seconds.]
[Your Skills have been disabled for 4 seconds.]

Losing control of its body, the two-metre-tall figure fell to the floor. No, it would be more accurate to say it collapsed in on itself as the fake limbs and head dissolved into a sort of red, slightly pulsating meat paste.

“Hah … Hahahaha!” laughed Fizzy as she peeked over the counter. “I knew it! I knew I wasn’t crazy! I kept telling them those dreams were far too real

to just be my imagination! Well who's crazy now, eh? Hahahaha!"

Clearly, Fizzy had been subjected to Xera's mind wipes one too many times, resulting in the worst-case scenario where she regained those memories. The Mimic didn't have the luxury of deducing that though. Right now it was barely even conscious, unable to move even a single muscle fibre. Even its magical perception was spinning around wildly, making it impossible to tell what was going on.

"Snack!" it called out telepathically. "Come gnome shop now!"

But there was no response. Boxxy didn't feel its wounded body healing, either, despite having left Mend Flesh toggled to 'on.' It then remembered that last notification said something about Skills being disabled. So *that* was what it meant.

"Now, you're mine!" declared the gnome. "And you'll pay for toying with me! For scheming behind my back!"

She ducked behind the counter and pulled a lever – the same one she had been fiddling with just moments ago. A large number of steel rods sprang up from the wooden floor, tearing it to pieces in the process and extending upwards all the way into the ceiling. The disabled monster was now surrounded on all sides, trapped inside a circular cage three metres in diameter.

"We'll see how the city guards deal with you!"

Fizzy leapt over the counter and ran out into the street.

This was not tasty at all!

[You are no longer stunned.]
[Your Skills are no longer disabled.]

"Snack!" it tried again.

"Yes, Master?" came Xera's reply.

"Come towards the shop and find the gnome!"

"Did you mess up with –"

"Now!"

"Right away, Master!"

The monster tried standing up, but couldn't properly control its extremities. Its entire body was numb, like it was not its own anymore. This was the first time it ever felt such a sensation. Or rather, such a lack of sensation.

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +140.]

Good, that was working again as well. However, this situation was already beyond the monster's control. At that moment, the Mimic decided to run. It already knew it would be no match for an entire city's worth of guards and adventurers, so running was a no-brainer, really. Which was good, because whatever passed for the shapeshifter's brain was still scrambled, making it hard to form complicated thoughts.

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +140.]

The mental and physical discomfort faded away almost completely once Mend Flesh restored the monster's HP to full in the next second. Now fully in control, Boxxy discarded the cheap clothes it was wearing and stood up on its spider legs. It took a step towards the edge of its prison but immediately shrank back from the buzzing steel bars. The Mimic didn't want to get anywhere near them, let alone touch them. The instincts that had been quiet as of late were screaming at it not to get close. It wasn't sure how, but some baser, more primal part of it recognized that its cage had been electrified.

This was bad. Electricity was bad. This entire damn thing was so bad that it made the Mimic want to hide in the deepest, darkest hole it could find.

"Ah!"

It finally understood. This was its elemental weakness, its vulnerability. Much like how undead would be made brittle and slow when bathed in holy magic, so too would shapeshifters lose control of their bodies when exposed to a strong electric charge. This phenomenon, officially referred to as 'Bane,' was something present in all monsters without exception. Boxxy had overheard other mercenaries discussing it, but it had no idea it would be this bad. Fizzy must have really done her homework to prepare a trap like this. It was the perfect snare for capturing a mimic.

Unfortunately, for all her theoretical knowledge, the gnome had neglected to take one thing into account: A trap was only as strong as the surface it was built on.

The chest opened up and a fleshy tongue wiggled free. A small hole appeared on its pointed tip and a green liquid sprayed out of it, courtesy of Acid Spray. It clung to the steel pipes and started eating away at them with a steady, hissing noise.

“Master, I see the gnome!” reported Xera. “She’s shouting at a group of guards and pointing towards the store.”

It looked like that Boxxy’s time in Erosa was now officially over.

“Leave her and come to me.”

“Understood, Master.”

While the acid did its thing, the Mimic forcefully dismissed Kora from the warehouse and started summoning her back. The acid was steadily eating away at its prison but would obviously take a long time before it completely broke through. That was fine, though, because this wasn’t the monster’s goal. The corrosive liquid leaked down between some cracks on the floor, causing sparks and smoke to erupt moments later. The Mimic used its magical perception to confirm that the wires under the floorboards were melted completely through and that the buzzing coming from the cage had died down.

Boxxy should have noticed this trap much, much sooner. It knew this expandable cage was there beforehand, but it failed to notice the extra machinery that wasn’t there the last time it had checked. That was because it simply didn’t have a habit of looking beneath the ground. Actually, it was more accurate to say that it had a habit of ignoring what lay beneath its feet unless it was actively looking for something beneath the surface. And since it had been to Fizzy’s numerous times without incident, it allowed itself to be distracted by her ‘gift.’

In short, Boxxy had gotten complacent and was now paying the price.

Kora’s summoning finished several seconds later. Using a big chunk of its MP like this was perhaps not the smartest idea, but the Mimic needed all the help it could get right now. Besides, it had just gotten a bunch of potions to help with that should the need arise.

“What was –! Eck!”

The fiend had been ready to complain about being dismissed so suddenly but gave up on that in favour of letting out a stupid noise when she saw her master in a cage. The stench of burnt shapeshifter flesh hit her nose in the next instant.

“Boss? What the fuck?” she exclaimed, covering her nose and mouth.

“Break this thing!”

“Alright!”

Her other three muscled arms gripped a steel bar each and pulled on them all at once. The metal creaked and groaned under the stress. Already weak from the acid, it gave and snapped off at the corroded points near the bottom. The fiend flexed her muscles and bent the vertical bars upwards, creating a gap large enough for the chest to exit sideways. Which was precisely what it did, though not before hesitating for a moment.

Obviously, this event wasn’t doing much to help with the Mimic’s grate-related trauma.

Having been released from its prison, Boxxy immediately leapt over the counter and started unlocking the metal safe hidden in the floor. It already knew the combination, since it spied on Fizzy opening it a few times. Inside were several satchels of gold, a few gems, and a weird metal tube-shaped device. It quickly tossed everything it could into its Storage without bothering to count it.

“Master! The guards are right outside the shop!”

The Mimic sighed at Snack’s report. Now it would have to murder who knew how many people until it reached the gate, probably wasting even more of its limited resources along the way. And now that its identity was out in the open, its alter ego would probably get a bounty, making it harder to reintegrate into society. Meaning that recouping its losses would be far, far more difficult.

And today was going so well, too!

Interlude
That Nagging Feeling

It started, as many life-changing revelations seem to, with the simplest thing.

A door that should have been ajar, wasn't.

Gnomes were often creatures of habit, and Cornie Fizzlesprocket was the embodiment of that stereotype. She woke up at precisely 6:41 every morning. She then rolled around in bed until 7:01 before getting up. Her morning routine of getting dressed, doing her hair up and eating breakfast was over and done with by 7:26, and she opened up her shop at exactly 7:30.

She spent the majority of an average day tinkering away at some project or another. On the rare occasion that a customer visited, she would yell out at them that she would be 'just a minute,' and exactly sixty seconds later would emerge from the back room to do business. At 12:45 in the afternoon, she temporarily closed up shop for lunch until 1:24 and resumed her business hours until 7:44. She spent the next thirty minutes cleaning up the store and organizing her workshop, before having dinner at 8:50. She was in bed by 9:15 and fell asleep by 10:43.

That last bit of her routine was a recent addition, however. Normally she'd be asleep by 8:44 after a long day of hard work, but she no longer had anyone to help out with chores. And nowadays, she normally spent nearly an hour and a half weeping in grief over the recent loss of her father and brother. They were the only family she had left in the Empire, so their deaths hit her hard. Alone in the dark with only her thoughts and memories for company, she cried herself to sleep nearly every night for twelve days straight.

People said wounds like these healed with time, but how much more would she have to endure this horrible pain? Weeks? Months? Years? She wanted specifics, an exact date and time when it would finally stop hurting, but nobody could give her a clear answer. 'It's not a set amount of time,' they would say with a shrug, 'It just happens.' – a clearly unscientific approach that endlessly infuriated Fizzy. If she had a clear goal, then she could grin

and bear it while silently counting away the seconds to that release inside her head.

Literally.

As an Artificer, Cornie was in possession of the Tick Counter Skill. It was an invaluable ability that allowed her to precisely measure the passage of time inside a corner of her mind. Using this Skill also allowed her to accurately gauge the interval between two events. It was precise enough to let Fizzy tell the difference between 2 seconds and 2.01 seconds if she put her mind to it. This was a very useful Skill when it came to building machines with many moving parts that had to work together.

It also had the side effect of allowing her to tell what the time was without having to look at a clock. Granted, it wasn't flawless, but it was still accurate to within ten seconds of the actual time – quite enough for one's day-to-day needs. So she was more than a little shocked when she realised one day that her internal clock was nine minutes slow. The gnome deduced it was probably caused by all the stress she had been through lately. It was a Skill that relied heavily on one's mental state, so things like that could happen. Therefore, Fizzy simply calibrated it to match the clock in her bedroom and thought nothing more of it.

But then, three days later, she realised her internal clock was five minutes slow. She corrected it again, but the very next day it was behind again, this time by sixteen whole minutes. Her father always used to say that 'once is happenstance, twice is coincidence, third time's a pattern.' So after the fourth time it happened she grew considerably worried. Was she going mad? Was the Skill somehow malfunctioning? Or maybe every single clock in her house was afflicted by some strange, identical defect?

The first one was a frightening possibility. The second was impossible and the fact she even considered that third scenario only made the first seem more likely. So she thought back on the days where she had been, for lack of a better term, missing time. And a pattern did indeed emerge.

It was all on days she was visited by her mysterious new pupil, a gigantic man who went by the slightly odd name of Boxxy. Not every visit of his was accompanied by a time lapse, but he had still been there every time there was an incident. Was that man somehow responsible? Cornie didn't

want to believe it. She refused to accept that a person who was thoroughly amazed by something simple and innocent like a wind-up toy mouse would harbour any sort of malicious intent. Someone who she could only think of as a ‘slightly awkward gentle giant.’

But then again, the door that should have been ajar, wasn’t.

Fizzy remembered that on the third and fourth times she noticed a ‘time skip,’ the door that connected her storefront and the workshop in the back had been firmly closed. She never shut that door. *Ever*. Not only did it block the sound of the entry bell, but it was much too big for her. It was designed for humans, after all. A gnome like Fizzy had to reach up just above her head to grab the door handle, which was so old that it often got stuck. It was inconvenient, awkward, and annoying to close and open that damned door. So she never did. The fact it had been closed on those days – and only those days – was her physical evidence that something or someone was messing with her.

And, of course, the only one present in the shop during those times was Boxxy.

She was deeply conflicted. On one hand, she had grown fond of the amazing pupil who eagerly soaked up all her teachings. It was even to the point where she chased off that guy who came asking questions. The innocent gnome did not want to believe that her only ray of happiness – that awkward, yet brilliant stranger – was somehow scheming something behind her back. But how? And to what end? She thought long and hard on those days but just could not remember anything else out of place.

That was when a creeping thought wormed its way into her head. It wasn’t that she couldn’t remember, but that she was *not allowed* to remember ... that her mind was being influenced somehow. And, of course, this immensely disturbing thought reared its head when she was rolling around in bed. She obsessed over it until well past midnight before sleep finally claimed her.

And that was when she had a nightmare. Of Boxxy unravelling into a collection of wood, tentacles, and teeth that held her down, tied her up, and dragged her off. A woman showed up next – a simple village girl with a

plain appearance. She shared a few words with the monstrous creature and then placed a hand on the gnome's head.

That was when Fizzy woke up screaming, drenched in sweat and out of breath. After calming down and realising it was still the middle of the night, she tried to dismiss it as just her mind playing tricks on her. She had been obsessing over this Boxxy thing all night, so it wasn't all that surprising she'd have a nightmare.

But then she had another. One where a Bladeblossom was set off accidentally and her student was injured without uttering a peep, despite being stabbed in the face and leaking sickly-looking yellow blood. It then leapt over the counter and again bound, gagged, and dragged her off. A woman appeared again, but this one was completely unlike the village girl in every way. She was a nun, with an entirely different voice and face, but she behaved in much the same way, right up until she put a hand on the gnome's head.

Fizzy woke up screaming once more. This wasn't her imagination running wild. It was way too real, way too detailed, and much more terrifying than any nightmare she'd ever had. Dawn was about to break, but she didn't wait for it. She immediately got up and ran off into the street to find a guard.

Then she remembered she was still in her sleepwear, so she sheepishly ran back inside, got dressed, and started having second thoughts. What if this was her imagination after all? What if she blamed an innocent man and was even more ostracized by the human community? Her mind remembered that 'guard' who dropped in asking about Boxxy and how she'd threatened him with a Lightning Thrower. Gnomes already had a bad reputation for being nutty. What if there was some inkling of truth to that stereotype? What if *she* was the crazy one after all?

But, there was a way to find out. A way to prove to the world, and to herself, that she was not insane. She ran into her workshop and started throwing together an orb that would discharge electricity when a button was pressed. A small, carefully calibrated charge that wouldn't do much to a human besides zap them, maybe cause some numbness at most. There was no danger of Boxxy dying from this. He was bound to be a strong adventurer, considering the amount of money he spent on Artificer supplies while suspiciously maintaining the outward appearance of a pauper.

That was, of course, assuming she was wrong and he was not what her nightmares said he was. But if the true identity of Boxxy T. Morningwood was indeed that of a shapeshifting mimic, then the jolt would be far more devastating. Cornie was very knowledgeable when it came to electricity and magnetism. Hardly surprising, considering those areas of study were what Arclight Artificers like herself were most concerned with. She was well aware that a powerful enough current would make a shapeshifter's body go haywire. She just had no idea she would use that knowledge to assault the only person in Erosa she could truly call a friend.

Wait, why was she so convinced about that fact? Why was it that whenever her thoughts drifted to Boxxy, they always saw him as a strangely lovable person. He was incredibly suspicious, however one looked at it. Was this more mind-fuckery at play? Come to think of it, weren't people in the street giving Boxxy weird looks? How come she saw nothing wrong with the guy? Were her eyes even real?

Fizzy slammed her forehead against her workbench, silencing those spiralling thoughts. She had already decided on a course of action, so she willed herself to focus on that rather than the unknown. She completed her gold-plated Stun Orb (tentative name) in just under an hour, using whatever spare parts she had lying around. It was a hack-job creation that would only work once before its internals fried themselves, but it was more than enough. At least the highly conductive outer shell would make sure its payload was delivered without issue.

She stared at its slightly reflective surface. What would she do after she presented it to the man? On the off chance she was wrong and he came out unfazed, she could play her 'gift' off as a malfunction and offer a discount for the trouble. The real problem was: what would happen if her nightmares were indeed reality and her only pupil turned out to be a monster? Would she be able to actually … kill it? Would she be able to bring herself to do that sort of thing?

She slammed her head on the workbench again. Monsters were cruel, heartless, and thought nothing of others, and anyone who believed otherwise was a fool begging for death. That was the harsh truth of this world. And although one could argue that monsters were mindless creatures merely following their instinct, it was also true that intelligent ones existed

out there. Beings who knew full well what they were doing and were perfectly capable of communicating with the so-called ‘enlightened’ races such as dwarves, humans, and elves, yet continued to act in much the same way. They *chose* to hurt others.

Fizzy’s dilemma should not have been an ethical or a moral one. If her ‘friend’ was a monster and she exposed it, then it would definitely try to kill her, and she would have to fight back. The real question was whether the gnome was physically capable of fighting back. She may have been Level 56, but that did not make her a combatant. Sure, she had high DEX, INT, WIS, and PER Attributes thanks to her Job and Skills, but she knew no Spells, had no idea how to swing a sword, and her END was truly pitiful. If a fight really broke out, she would surely be eaten. If she had the ability to stand up to the monster in the first place, then it wouldn’t have been able to pin and restrain her as completely as her nightmares said.

That was when she remembered her father’s security measure: the ‘Insta-Cage’ hidden beneath the floorboards. It had always been there, but it never got used on account of nobody being stupid enough to stir up trouble in the middle of the city. Especially not inside a poor-looking Artificer shop like this one.

But it was still there. And knowing her old man’s formidable mechanical Skill, it would probably still work. The only problem was, she had serious doubts simple steel would hold back that monster. So she closed up the shop and started modifying the trap. The gnome worked frantically throughout that entire day and most of the night but still wasn’t finished. Her work continued undisturbed on the second day, and then, at noon on the third day after her revelation, she finally finished electrifying the cage. She was in the middle of double-checking all the connections and preparing herself mentally for the encounter when the door swung open.

Gnomes were creatures of habit, even in seemingly stressful conditions. And Fizzy had a habit of unlocking the front door every morning and locking it only when the sun started setting. Which was why Boxxy was able to easily enter the place as if nothing was wrong. It was honestly a miracle the target of her suspicions hadn’t visited during those two-and-a-half days she was busy. Her confrontation could have ended *very* differently.

Though considering the events that followed, many people would argue that would have been preferable.

Chapter Four
Chaos

Part One

A squad of twenty armed guards marched steadily down the city street. The disjointed clanking noises their plate armour made with every step sounded like a stampede of steel. A female gnome with pink pigtails who went by the name of Fizzy was among them. Her adorable appearance and the slightly comical way she had to half-jog to keep up were completely at odds with the military formation.

“I swear to Teresa, pipsqueak,” complained the squad leader, “if I find you’re messing with us and –”

“I. Am not. Messing with you!” insisted the gnome. “I really did capture a mimic in my store!”

“Right, right, so you say,” said the old soldier, readjusting his steel helmet. Looking down at that gnome any longer was going to give him a crick in his neck.

“Hey Sarge,” called out one of the guards, “do we really have to do this?”

“Yes, we do, moron. A citizen demanded our help, so we’re helping. Whether there’s any credibility to her claims is another thing entirely.”

He tossed a dubious look at the citizen in question.

“I already told you I’m telling the truth!”

“We’ll see about that,” the sergeant said without even trying to hide the doubt in his voice. “This the place?”

“Yeah, that’s it. It should be locked up inside.”

The fully armed squad of soldiers stood in front of the store where the little gnome had led them. It was perfectly quiet and completely ordinary aside from the flashy sign that read ‘Fizzy’s Fidgety Widgets.’ The squad leader pointed to three of his men and ordered them to enter the store. The slightly undisciplined guards idly walked to the door and opened it. Peering inside,

the man at the front saw a ransacked shop, a mangled cage, and a pair of metal-clad fists flying towards his face.

“ORRAH!”

“Ge-hut!”

Kora’s powerful twinned punches sent him flying into the other two men who were with him, knocking them all to the ground. The fiend went out the door with a jump and slammed her heels right into the first man’s broken face. His head splattered against the cobblestone road as if it were an overripe tomato.

“To arms!” shouted the sergeant, doing his best to rally his men. “Rogue demon on the loose! Prepare to subdue it.”

“Ooh-rah!” replied the guards in unison, drawing their weapons and assuming a formation.

The gnome screamed and ran for cover. The other civilians followed her example. They all scattered and ran for their lives the instant they saw the grotesque scene of a man having his head crushed inside his helmet. As for the perpetrator, she didn’t skip a beat. Kora crouched down, grabbed the other two men at her feet and tossed them into the rest of the armoured platoon. They collided with their squadmates, nearly knocking them over.

CRASH

Something flew out of the door’s dusty window. Something wooden, rectangular, and multi-legged.

“HRRRAAAAAKKH!”

It let out an unearthly sound, somewhere between a hiss, a growl, and a scream.

“Reform the ranks!” shouted the sergeant.

The guards in front quickly formed a shield wall while those in the back prepared to cast magic or pulled back their bowstrings. While their attention was focused on the new threat, Kora threw a Mass Panic Spell Crystal towards their front line. It shattered open, and magic-induced fear gripped all the soldiers caught in its effect.

“Lion’s Courage!”

One of the backliners, a Priest, quickly chanted a Spell to combat this effect. A blue wave spread out from his position, dispelling the Mass Panic from his squadmates.

“Fireball!”

“Ice Spear!”

“Sniper Shot!”

The rest of the rearguard unleashed various ranged attacks and magic on the rapidly approaching Mimic, but they didn’t find their target. Kora leapt in front of her master and activated her defensive Demonic Carapace Skill. Grey metallic scales instantly covered her red skin, mitigating a significant chunk of that barrage. Boxxy jumped onto her back and wrapped its legs around her waist, shoulders and chest, firmly attaching itself to her like an oversized backpack. Now that it no longer had to worry about its footing, the Mimic could focus on other things for the moment.

Like chanting magic of its own.

“Hark Inhusion!”

“OOORRRRRAAAH!”

The fiend roared as the power boost of the (slightly misspoken) Dark Infusion Spell surged through her once more, filling her with a temporary burst of strength and speed. She ran forward, crashed into the guards’ disorganized front line and went on a rampage.

“This isn’t happening,” mumbled Fizzy.

The gnome had ducked into a small alley between two buildings during her panic earlier. However, instead of doing the wise thing and running, she simply stood there and stared in horror at the scene some twenty metres away from her.

A towering four-armed demon was fighting a bunch of guards. Her heavy fists dented their plate armour and crumpled their shields. The metal scales that protected her body had fallen off and she received multiple wounds from those in front of her. But rather than following common sense and growing sluggish, her movements actually became sharper. Faster. Deadlier.

The gnome had no way of knowing this, but it was simply the effects of the demon's Side Job. As a Level 14 Berserker, Kora had two of the Job's Skills available to her: Level 5 Bloodlust and Level 3 Brutal Fervour. The first of those amplified damage dealt whenever she landed a killing blow, with the second increasing the effects of her DEX and AGI Attributes in direct proportion to her missing HP.

Berserkers thrived on battle. Hungered for it. These personifications of bloodshed and violence fought without regard for their own safety until either they or their enemies were dead. It was a truly reckless Job with a high mortality rate that demanded a primal and intense inner rage not many people had. There were not many willing or suitable to go down the path of a Berserker, and fewer still lived long enough to develop it in any meaningful way.

Kora was a prime example of that. Her reckless behaviour got her killed with frightening regularity. However, unlike the fleeting existence of mortals, she was a demon. A being whose soul could not be extinguished outside the most extreme of circumstances. All she needed was a master willing to summon her and fling her into battle over and over. Boxxy was a perfect fit, and she took advantage of that arrangement by fully immersing herself in the destructive rage only a demon could muster. She stood covered in wounds and neck-deep in enemies, but not showing a single sign of slowing down or taking a step back.

"This isn't happening," Fizzy repeated.

As terrifying as a practically-unchained demon was, the thing clinging to her back was far, far worse – a chest-shaped monster with three red tentacles growing out of it, each one gripping a bloodied longsword. Anyone who dared approach the fiend from the rear got slashed up or covered in hissing, putrid green acid. Anyone who attacked it from range saw the fiend abruptly turn around and take the hits in its stead. It was plainly obvious that, rather than covering the demon's back, the Mimic was simply using her as a shield ... a cold-blooded, pragmatic, and overtly violent approach to combat that Fizzy never dreamed existed.

"This. Isn't. Happening!"

The overwhelming shock of seeing the terror from her dreams lay waste to a squad of fully armed guards gripped the gnome's heart in terror.

"Oh, but it is," came the cold, emotionless female voice directly above her.

Frozen in fear, Fizzy could not even look up, too afraid to confront what was undoubtedly another of that thing's minions. She felt the oddly familiar sensation of a slender hand being placed on her head.

"Sleep."

It took about two minutes for Boxxy and Kora to completely dismantle the guards. Even if they were around Level 40, their actual offensive abilities were closer to Level 25 or so – an unfortunate downside of power-levelling. Their bodies were still much stronger than they would have been otherwise though, so it took a while to beat them down at first. Then Xera joined in halfway through the battle, raining red-hot flames and molten magma on the ground-based troops from the rooftops. Granted, she almost died from getting hit by one Spell, but her Pyroclasm Spells were an excellent diversion and deterrent, even if their damage didn't seem like much.

"What now, Master?" asked the succubus as she clutched at the gaping hole in her stomach.

"Where is Fizzy?" Boxxy replied telepathically.

"Over in the alley."

"We're bringing her with us."

" … We are?"

Xera thought Boxxy wanted to drain the life out of her, then absorb her corpse. Any other demon would've done that, and the murderous box's thought processes were quite in tune with the rest of her kind. Admittedly, its way of thinking was more akin to the fiend's simplistic logic, but 'mercy' was definitely not a concept the Mimic understood. Meaning that, if it wasn't going to kill the tiny twerp, then it must have had a very good reason for not doing so.

"Yes. I want her Artificer Job."

Ah, there it was. Apparently even in this situation, it still wanted to take advantage of the runt's training. It was a surprisingly good call, as there was

no telling when – or even *if* – it could find another Artificer trainer as capable as that gnome. Or as gullible, for that matter.

"Understood, Master." Xera limped off towards the alley where she had stashed the comatose gnome while Boxxy surveyed the empty streets.

The civilians had already abandoned the area and the road was quiet. The only sounds that could be heard were the gentle crackling of the flames left over by the pyromaniac's magic, as well as the echoes of screams from nearby roads. Even the shops had already evacuated by that point.

However, this calm would likely not last long before more guards arrived on the scene.

The succubus returned less than a minute later, holding the little person who had been unfortunate enough to catch her Master's attention. "Here she is, Master."

The Mimic wasn't sure if it was even possible to convince her to teach it again even though its cover had been magnificently blown. Snack's sleepy-time magic tricks couldn't be relied on anymore, either. Well, bringing the small, pink-haired woman was still worth it. She had more value alive than dead, but the Mimic could just kill her and attempt Cadaver Absorption on her if she refused to … cooperate.

The materials necessary to put together various Artificer gadgets and gizmos would not be a problem, at least for the time being. Boxxy had already taken the liberty of cramming as many bits and pieces from the gnome's workshop as would fit into its Storage, so it was good on springs, screws, cogs, and bolts.

"Get her over to the south wall without drawing attention," it commanded.

"At once, Master."

Not three seconds later, the succubus had assumed a variant of her village girl disguise. Her hair was a mess, her clothes were dirty and her skirt had been ripped. The gnome in her hands was now wrapped in a thick blanket to conceal her shape, completing the image of a distraught mother carrying her sickly, slightly big-headed child to safety.

"I will be off, Master." Xera gave a tiny bow and trotted off towards the south.

“What about me, boss?” asked Kora.

Boxxy quickly confirmed she only had 290 HP remaining out of a total of 1,512.

“Did you use Second Wind?” it asked.

“Yeah.”

As expected. There was no way this reckless demon survived that many wounds without tapping into her only means of HP recovery. Even though they had not been as durable as the murk dwellers, the guardsmen still did a considerable amount of damage in the short scuffle, mostly due to the presence of magic users among their number. She had also been used as a meat shield, so there was no way she wouldn’t be near death.

This was an untasty situation. Boxxy wanted to use Arms as a diversion to draw the people’s attention away from itself and Snack while it made its escape over the wall. And Arms would not be much of a diversion if she only lasted a few seconds. Thankfully, it could easily solve this problem. First it chugged two of its newly-bought mana potions to replenish a significant chunk of its missing MP. It then dismissed Kora and started re-summoning her. Doing this would not only restore her back to full HP but also bypass the day-long cooldown period on Second Wind.

“Over there!” came a shout from the north.

Guard reinforcements had just arrived from one of the adjacent streets. And the first thing they saw after turning the corner was a brightly glowing chest with concentric circles of bright light swirling around it.

“By the Goddess!”

And then they realised that it was standing in the middle of twenty bloodied, charred, pummelled, mangled, melted, decapitated, or otherwise completely decimated bodies of their colleagues.

This realisation was followed immediately by the appearance of a four-armed, red-skinned demon.

“T-to arms, men!” screamed the person who appeared to be in charge. The guards responded by drawing all of their blades, much like the first group had.

“Attack them, then draw them north,” Boxxy ordered.

“Hehehe! You got it, boss!”

Kora ran at the guards, screaming her lungs out. The men and women in her way seemed to completely forget about the glowing box as they turned their attention towards the fast-approaching threat. The Mimic hadn’t revealed its identity as a monster quite yet, so it was possible they mistook it for some sort of arcane artefact with the ability to call out demons. Wouldn’t be the first time something like that showed up, after all.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

“ … Huh?”

Boxxy let out a stupid-sounding noise after being notified its Snack had just been killed. Someone must have seen through her disguise. But surely she would have reported if that was the case, right? Or did she get taken out in a single hit? It wanted to ask her the details, but it couldn’t summon her under the current circumstances. Doing that would surely draw attention to itself again, and it lacked the MP to do so, even if it did drink both of its remaining mana potions. If only there was a way to speak to her without –

The soul number thing Carl mentioned! That would have been immensely useful right now, but Boxxy had completely neglected to ask her about it!

Silently cursing its own complacency, it quickly reassessed the situation. One of its familiars had been taken out and another was engaged in combat. The south wall was the closest one from its position, but it had some unknown enemy in its way. Guards would be pouring in primarily from the north, since the city’s keep was located in that direction. East seemed like the monster’s best chance of getting out of Erosa.

So the monster abandoned all pretence of being a chest, sprouted spider legs, and scuttled off into the alleyway, making a beeline for the edge of the city. Some of the guards saw it move but were unable to do anything since they had their hands full dealing with Kora. Boxxy remotely checked on her HP and determined she should be able to buy it at least a minute. Plenty of time to get some ground between it and –

[Your familiar has been banished.]

Her remaining 1,132 HP disappeared in an instant.

Okay. *Now* was the time to panic.

The Mimic scuttled along the alleyways more desperately than before. No, walking was too slow, it needed to get away from whatever was picking off its minions. And it needed to do so right. Bloody. *Now!* It quickly transformed its eight spider-feet into a set of four organic wheels and propelled itself down the tight spaces between the buildings. It used its flexible body to make twists and turns that would normally be impossible, bouncing off walls to round corners and jumping over debris and garbage that stood in its way.

It exited the tight pathways and found itself on another of the city's main roads, at which point it turned south. Whoever or whatever was behind the deaths of its minions was no longer in that direction, meaning the Mimic had a clear path towards the wall.

"Aaaah!"

"What's that!"

"Mom can I ride it?"

"Holy crap, what!"

It rolled through onlookers and pedestrians who probably had no idea why or how a treasure chest was rolling down the street, but they were in its way. The monster managed to avoid colliding with most of them by ducking and weaving and sometimes jumping over them without slowing down. However, it couldn't avoid all of them. After all, it was rolling around at speeds like that of a horse in full gallop, albeit with a much smaller stature. Some crashes were therefore inevitable.

[Your target has suffered blunt force trauma. Target HP -103.]

It ran over an old woman who didn't get out of the way in time.

[Your target has been crushed. Target HP -96.]

It hit a puppy crossing the road, killing it instantly.

[Your target has suffered blunt force trauma. Target HP -56.]

It smashed into a random adventurer's knee before he could react.

Regardless, none of those things could drastically slow it down. It was moving at high speeds and had a mass of nearly a hundred kilograms. It was quite heavy considering its relatively compact size, meaning it could barrel through any civilians who got in its way with ease. And of course it kept two eyes wide open all the while – one in the front to watch out for obstacles and one in the rear to check for anyone who might have been following it.

The rear was clear, but there was trouble brewing at the front.

“Form ranks and stop that thing!”

A row of guards stood in its way, and it could make out the tall stone wall just beyond them. It just had to get past these guys and it would be out of the city, at which point it could keep rolling down the Imperial highway going east until it was well and truly out of sight. But first it had to clear the way since the humans had formed a shield wall in its path.

It momentarily slowed its speed and popped open its lid. The albino Xera-on-wheels made her first ever public appearance. Every single person on the street gaped at the bizarre sight of a naked, large-breasted albino lady rolling down the street while holding a staff. The two sets of pointy teeth surrounding her made the display far more horrifying than erotic.

Boxxy no longer cared about the opinions of those meals-on-legs, though.

“Dark Explosion ~♪!”

It ignored their reactions and calmly used its magic to force open the way. The shadowy shock wave that erupted in the middle of the guard’s line knocked them on their asses, allowing the Mimic to roll through them unhindered. It quickly retracted Xera’s upper body and sped up towards the base of the city’s walls. All that was left now was to hop into the air at the last moment and redirect its momentum upwards. At that point, it would bring out its arachnid limbs and finish scaling the fortification before leaping off.

It was a relatively solid plan of action, though the monster never got the chance to execute it.

TWACK

A black boot kicked the Mimic from the side seemingly out of nowhere, sending it flying off-course and careening into a nearby building. The monster smashed clean through someone's living room and flew out of the other side of the house. It crashed into a random vegetable stall, sending plant matter, splinters, and monster blood everywhere, much to the distress of the stall's vendor. The man gave up on screaming about his cabbages and made the wise decision to run away immediately.

[You have suffered major blunt force trauma. HP -1,152.]
[You have been stunned for 5 seconds.]
[Proficiency level increased. Natural Armour is now Level 7. END +6.]

"Kreh! Kphogh! Skraktktkt!"

The badly injured Mimic let out a series of guttural noises. Having been kicked through a building, it was understandably in a pretty sorry state. What was once a faux-wood chest with wheels was now a mangled mess of flesh. Its shell had been splintered, its circular limbs were torn off, and its yellow blood oozed from multiple wounds.

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +95.]

And there went the last of its MP. The cheat-like Mend Flesh Skill that gave it so much trouble in the past was simply not able to do much for its owner in this current situation.

"Oh? Still alive, are we?"

Boxxy heard a man's voice, directly from above. It sounded very close, as if the person was leaning over the creature. However, its magical perception was not picking up anything or anyone.

"Good," the voice said. "I was afraid I overdid things with that little love tap."

It was a calm, collected voice. Oddly soothing and terrifying at the same time. It was also rather rough, but Boxxy had more important things to worry about than identifying its owner.

[You are no longer stunned.]

The Mimic tried to move the moment its consciousness stabilized. It grew a set of spider legs in an instant and tried to stand but immediately fell to one

side.

“Don’t move, beast.”

“Rakh! Hrak?” it sputtered in its confusion. Where was this phantom speaking to it from?

“Come now, you can do better than that. I saw you grow an entire person just seconds ago.”

“…”

Taking the hint, Boxxy opened the mangled remains of its upper jaw and formed a human-like head out of its badly wounded tongue, which naturally assumed Xera’s form.

And then, when that head opened its eyes, it finally saw him.

An old man with a leather hood stood mere centimetres from the wrecked Mimic, with arms crossed across his chest. His face held two deep scars, one across his left cheek and the other on the right side of his forehead. His hair was grey from age and his skin was heavily wrinkled, yet he exuded a sense of youth and vitality as if he was in the prime of his life.

The body armour he wore was made out of thick, hardened leather that had been painted blue and bore a bizarre palm-shaped yellow mark on his left shoulder. A leather sling with several pouches on it was draped over his shoulder and two short weapons – daggers by the look of them – were sheathed on the left side of his belt. His lithe legs ended in a pair of plain black boots, the left one bearing a yellow smudge.

“Ah, there we go,” he said with a stern expression. “So you can understand me, right?”

“ … Y-yes,” Xera’s borrowed voice stammered as the Mimic spoke. It was afraid. This man was utterly beyond Boxxy’s comprehension. Not only did he nearly kill it in one blow, but he had also completely eluded the monster’s magical perception. Only its eyes were able to track him, and even those seemed to want to naturally slide off the man and look elsewhere. But it didn’t dare do such a thing.

“Good. It’s a start. Do you have a name, beast?”

“ … Yes.”

“And? What is it?”

“Boxxy T. Morningwood.”

“Morningw– Haah.” The man sighed and put a hand over his face.

“Dare I ask what the ‘T’ stands for?”

“Trap.”

“Of course it does … Well then, ‘Boxxy.’ I suppose since you gave me your name I will give you mine. I am Edward Allen, Spymaster to his Majesty Emperor Joseph Frederick von Einhart the Third.”

He went down on one knee and stared deeply into the Mimic’s face, which caused the monster to recoil and shiver in fear.

“And I will have you answer some questions regarding that four-armed demon back there and the big glowing crater far to the north.”

[General Information]
Edward Gordon Allen
Leader of The Gilded Hand
Human (Ascendant), Male, 103 years old
Level 100.00 Rogue (MAX)
Level 75.00 Spy (MAX)
Level 59.55 Occult Alchemist
4030/4030 HP (+7.5/sec)
1885/1885 MP (+3.0/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 245, DEX 964, AGI 645, END 757, INT 377, WIS 300, LCK 120, MNT 82, CHR 172, PER 342

Part Two

Boxxy woke up with its usual violent flailing.

“Hrrmmpf?”

Or at least it tried to. In the next instant, it was made painfully aware of two solid metal clamps that were bolted onto its imitation wood surface. They completely encircled its body as if it was a barrel, preventing its maw from opening up. Perhaps it was a good thing the Mimic had been knocked out; having those braces affixed to its body would have been incredibly painful to experience. Whatever damage it suffered as a result of the ‘operation’ had already healed up, that only made its current situation even worse. Its

wounds had closed up around the steel screws holding its bindings, causing its flesh to fuse with the foreign objects. It would be impossible to take these things off without having chunks of its own body ripped out.

Those were hardly all of the restraints, however. The monster was hanging inside a cubic cage that was about two metres long, wide, and tall. It was being suspended by four heavy-duty chains, which connected those metal clamps to each upper corner of its new prison. The series of vertical and horizontal bars were made out of an ominous-looking black metal, and judging by the low buzzing and blue sparks that occasionally leapt between them, the bars were currently electrified. If the Mimic hadn't been as firmly strung up as it was, it would have swung into the metal and electrocuted itself without meaning to.

As for the source of the electrical charge, that was most likely the large metal box attached to the outside of the cage. Its faceplate had a few switches and dials on it, and two bright blue wires connected its insides to the cage. Boxxy peeked inside the thing using its magical perception, seeing a complicated hodgepodge of wiring and circuitry and a glowing tank of shimmering, bright blue liquid. That must have been the fuel supplying power to the cage.

Now that it had properly regained consciousness, the monster began to remember the situation it was in. A human had completely defeated it with a single blow. After introducing himself as Edward, he then poured some strange liquid onto the Mimic which made it pass out. And now it was here.

Where was *here*, though?

The room the cage was sitting in seemed to be a large jail cell, probably inside the local keep's dungeon. That would be the 'lock them up and throw away the key' type of dungeon, not the 'there's a giant exploding shiny in the middle of it' kind that Boxxy was born in. The walls, floor, and ceiling were nothing but plain stone bricks. Well, aside from the rubber mat underneath the cage insulating it from the rest of the room. For some reason, there was an empty wooden chair directly in front of –

"Finally awake?"

"MMFFGH!"

A voice came from somewhere in front, causing the Mimic to panic. It then recalled that the old man who captured it was somehow able to elude the creature's magical perception. There were a number of ways one could avoid detection through mystical means, and the culprit, in this case, was the Level 80 Rogue Skill called Obfuscate. Boxxy wasn't aware such a thing existed, though, so it was completely lost as to how such a thing was possible. The most it could do was confirm that the voice came from somewhere in front, so the Mimic grew a large feline eye on top of its lid, where a chest's lock might be.

Once it was armed with a more mundane type of vision, Edward once more 'appeared' before it. He was sitting cross-legged in the chair right outside the cage and took the blinking yellow eye as a sign that the monster was, indeed, awake.

"Very good," he said in a calm manner. "Now then, do grow back that head so we can have words. I'm sure – oh, you already did. Never mind then."

The sheer speed at which Xera's flawlessly sculpted face appeared out of the monster's front caught him a little bit unawares. It looked so *real*, too. As if someone had cut off a woman's head, shaved it clean, bleached the skin, then glued it onto a chest. The man's eyes seemed to linger on the pseudo-succubus's pointed ears, which were normally hidden by her silky long hair.

The Spymaster took out a small, leather-bound notebook and a Never-ending Quill. He flipped the booklet open to a blank page and scribbled 'Erosa mimic interrogation' at the very top as a sort of title, then got down to business.

"Let's begin, then. First of all, why use that appearance?" He gestured at Xera's pointy-eared face.

"It's easy." Boxxy answered in a hoarse voice completely mismatched with the beautiful face it was using. It was much closer to its natural way of speech rather than that of the sultry succubus.

"Easy, how?" inquired Edward.

"I know it the best."

"Uh-huh."

He wrote down ‘elf witch connection?’ on the first line.

“And who is it you’re imitating?”

“Snack.”

“I mean, what does this individual mean to you?”

“She is Snack.”

“What is her name?”

“Snack.”

Edward sighed sharply. This was only his third time speaking to a monster capable of both reason and language, so he had forgotten that one had to let go of certain expectations when speaking to such creatures. Some would argue he should just put the squeeze on his suspect, but he knew from experience that torture was not a viable method of gathering information. His way of interrogating prisoners was much faster, more reliable, and far less messy, although it did require a certain amount of patience.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Who’s Snack?” he asked.

“My thing.”

Make that a *lot* of patience.

“Where is Snack right now?”

“The Beyond.”

“So it’s a demon? Then how come it’s called Snack?”

He was keenly aware demons usually had long names that were nigh-impossible to say correctly without a certain amount of practice.

“Very tasty, but not very filling.”

“ … Right, and what species of demon is she?”

“Succubus.”

“So that face you’re showing me belongs to a succubus?”

“Yes.”

“And you call her ‘Snack’ because you … like eating her?”

“Yes.”

The Spymaster quickly crossed out ‘elf connection?’ and wrote ‘perverted box’ next to it.

“Then what of the red-skinned, four-armed demon that was reportedly with you? Is she your ally?”

“Yes.”

He quickly added ‘knows 4-armed demon’ to his notes.

“What is your relationship with it?”

“She is my thing.”

He circled the words ‘perverted box’ and underlined them. He then raised an eyebrow at his own ‘notes.’

“How are either of those ‘your things,’ exactly?”

“Contracted to me.”

“ … *You’re* the summoner?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re a Warlock?”

“Yes.”

“…”

The human went silent for a few seconds, then abruptly stood up and walked away somewhere, outside the Mimic’s line of sight. There was the sound of a door opening and some distant voices were heard, but Boxxy couldn’t make out anything intelligible. Edward returned a few moments later and took his seat, then continued the interrogation.

“Who taught you how to summon her?”

“Carl.”

“Does he have a last name?”

“Don’t know.”

“Uh-huh, and where is this Carl?”

"…"

The Mimic hesitated for a moment, as it had never really thought about that before. Where *was* that guy? Was he really in the Beyond? That was where demons normally resided, but Carl seemed to have access to something physical that made clacking noises. Such a thing could not exist in a place that was supposedly made up of dreams, nightmares, and loose thoughts. Then, was he in the material realm? Or some other place?

"Answer me!" yelled Edward, completely derailing the Mimic's train of thought.

"Ack! I don't know!"

The Spymaster wrote down 'Carl – Warlock mentor??' in his notes and circled it.

"When did you contract this fiend!"

"Twenty-two days ago! I think!"

"You *think*?"

"It was dark! Inside!" explained the scared monster. "Not sure of actual day! Please, no more yelling!"

"…"

The Spymaster regained his composure at the sight of the Mimic swaying back and forth in fear while shaking the pale white head sticking out of it. It was oddly pathetic, almost innocent in some weird way. Edward had unwittingly put too much force behind his voice when he heard the monster say 'twenty-two days ago.' He could be forgiven for getting excited though, as that was the same day the Calamity happened.

He wrote in 'fiend contract – before or after CoM?' in his notebook.

Of course, he wasn't simply taking the monster's word on all this stuff. Edward was in possession of an Ultimate Skill called Eyes of Truth, which he obtained when his Rogue Job hit Level 100. It let him pierce the veil on any deception and easily see through both audible and visible lies. That was how he was able to instantly see through the succubus's disguise the day before and apprehend her. It was a powerful ability well-suited to his line of work, but he kept it a secret from the rest of the world for three reasons.

The first of those was religion. If the temples knew he had obtained a Skill that was so in tune with the Goddess Teresa herself, he'd probably get dragged into all sorts of theological nonsense he wanted no part in. Such things would do nothing but waste his valuable time and attract unwanted attention that interfered with his work. Plus, he was never a particularly pious or god-fearing man anyway, so mingling with the clergy was more or less the opposite of his idea of a good time.

The second reason was politics. He knew first-hand that nobles were creatures who lied all the time in order to protect their various interests. Which wasn't to say it was always out of ill-will, as even the righteous ones had secrets they wished to protect. If they knew of Edward's flawless lie detector, they would likely plot against him or his office, which in turn would just open up more pointless work for the Spymaster to deal with. Much like with the clergy, having to 'entertain' the nobility was too much of a nuisance.

The third reason was effectiveness. If word spread of his Ultimate Skill, then that would make it much harder to use. People would choose their words far more carefully or lie by omission and misdirection. Erosa's recent troubles with that nun and her 'cousin' were a prime example of how one could skirt the truth.

Speaking of which.

"What of the disappearance of sister Lyo Rosetta? Did you have anything to do with her?"

"Who?"

"The nun that purportedly stole the Holy Pearl."

"I don't know such a person."

This was, of course, the truth. Boxxy did know of a *succubus* that stole a Holy Pearl, but it knew nothing about a nun doing something like that. The old human stared at it for a few seconds before jotting down a note saying that case was probably unrelated. Having warmed up sufficiently, he moved on to the meat of the matter.

"What do you know of the Calamity of Monotal?"

"What's a Monotal? Is it tasty?"

“ … You don’t know about that place?”

“No.”

The gears started spinning in the Spymaster’s head. That statement was not a lie, but it didn’t mean it was true, either. Perhaps it knew the place by another name, so Edward altered his line of questioning.

“Have you ever been inside another city before coming here?”

“Where’s here?”

“Erosa.”

“What’s an Erosa? Is it tasty?”

The Spymaster took a deep breath.

“It’s the city where I captured you.”

“Oh.”

“…”

The two stared at each other for a while in total silence.

“Well?”

“What?”

“So have you ever been to another city besides Erosa or not?”

“No.”

“Then where were you before coming here?”

“On the road.”

“Haaah … Where did you live before moving to Erosa?”

The Mimic paused for a moment to consider this question. Did it actually live anywhere? It had been pretty much homeless ever since it got out of the dungeon, so technically speaking, that was its last place of residence.

“Litigar Dungeon Complex.”

“So, you were born in that dungeon?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you leave it?”

“Got hungry.”

‘Sweeper?’ was swiftly added to the list.

“Have you seen the human city near that dungeon?”

“Yes.”

The old Spymaster felt a bit of tension leaving his shoulders. Now they were getting somewhere.

“That place is the city of Monotal.”

“Oh.”

“So you know of it after all?”

“ … Yes.”

“Did you know it was destroyed?”

“Yes.”

“How did you know it was gone?”

“Saw the smoke cloud.”

“Did you have anything to do with that?”

“No.”

The monster had just lied for the first time in this interview, though Edward was not surprised. Right now this creature’s life rested entirely in the hands of a human, and it did not want to openly admit to murdering thousands of his kind. It was clearly a moron, but even it wasn’t *that* stupid. Rather than being infuriated, however, the Spymaster was actually delighted. He had finally gotten a real lead on that troublesome case, and the faster he cracked it, the sooner he would be able to get out of here and back to the capital.

“Were you the one who destroyed it?” he asked.

“No.”

This one wasn’t a lie, a fact that immediately put a damper on the man’s rising mood. As for why his Ultimate Skill had deemed it so, it was because the truth was a more subjective thing than one might think. If someone held

a misinformed opinion without knowing it and shared it out loud, then his words would be honest, regardless of being factually incorrect.

In this case, Boxxy legitimately believed from the bottom of its soul that it was not responsible for the destruction of Monotal. It was that giant shiny core and the mysterious ‘voice’ behind it that were the real culprits. After all, the dungeon was close enough that the city would’ve been vaporized regardless of whether the Mimic dumped the thing on them. So while it wasn’t completely unrelated to the incident, it failed to see how any of that was its fault.

Its ability to wholeheartedly deflect blame like this was a truly frightening thing.

Edward didn’t give up so easily, though. This box knew something, so he decided to keep asking questions until he got the information he wanted.

“Did you order your familiar to destroy it, then?”

“No.”

Another truth. In this instance, Boxxy had ordered Arms to roll a ball into a city. The destruction sort of happened after that.

“Did you order *anyone* to destroy that city?”

“No.

“Did someone tell you to make sure it was destroyed?”

“Make sure what was destroyed?”

“The city!”

“What about it?”

“Were you working with anyone to help you destroy the city of Monotal!”

“Oh! No.”

“Then – are you affiliated with an elven witch in any way?”

“What’s an affiliated? Is it tasty?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!”

CLANG

The Spymaster had finally lost his cool and leapt out of his chair, punching the obsidian cage. It rattled and the metal bar he hit even bent slightly from the impact. It also reacted like any electrified surface would when something conductive made contact with it.

BDZT

“Gah!”

[You have been shocked by a jolt of electricity. HP -25.]

“Mother fucker that stung!” he cursed as he shook his shocked fist.

Relatively speaking, the jolt was completely insignificant, but that didn’t mean the sudden bolt of pain had been a pleasant one. Edward took a few deep breaths to calm himself. The answers were not an issue; he just had to ask the right question. Deciding to change up his approach yet again, he reached into his tunic and took out a rolled-up parchment.

“Okay, look, do you know this person?”

He unfurled it in front of his prisoner, revealing the expertly drawn image of a stern-looking middle-aged elf woman. She had short, spiky hair and a deep vertical scar across her left eye. This was an artist’s rendition of the culprit thought to be the main perpetrator behind the act, courtesy of Bernard Samson’s testimony.

“No.”

Again, not a lie.

“ … Is this succubus – this Snack - also your familiar?”

“Yes.”

“Did you tell her to disguise herself as an elf?”

“No.”

The man kept going back and forth, exploring the possibility of the succubus pretending to be his suspect, but couldn’t get any confirmation. He rightfully felt like was on the right track, but Boxxy had no idea that Xera had gone and done something like that. As such, Edward was completely unable to grasp the connection between the woman in the picture and the box in front of him and was forced to drop that line of

questioning. He also considered the possibility of this succubus acting on her own, but he had no way of confirming that.

“Do you at least know what happened to the city?”

“What city?”

Edward took another deep breath. These endless questions were getting on his nerves. Normally his Silver Tongue Skill would have his prisoners spilling their guts all on their own, but it seemed ineffective on this particular monster. The way it randomly ignored the context within the conversation was especially troublesome.

“How was the city of Monotal destroyed?”

“It blew up.”

“AAARGH!”

CLANG

BDZT

“Ghah!”

This was incredibly infuriating. Something about this moronic box ticked off the Spymaster immensely. It was partly his own fault, though. He had briefly forgotten that his Ultimate Skill was not almighty and that open-ended questions like that last one were the Skill’s weakness. He had to stick to concise questions whose answer could be a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ if he wanted to get anywhere.

After rebuilding his composure yet again, he briefly thought back on what he knew about his captive.

He had randomly stumbled upon a rampaging monster that, against all odds, seemed to somehow be connected to the Calamity he had come here to investigate. The key to that event was bound to be buried somewhere in the creature’s dim-witted mind, but Edward lacked the necessary details to ask the right questions. The animate chest had also shown to be capable of lying in order to protect itself, so simply asking about the ‘how’ and ‘why’ was likely pointless.

What about a slightly different approach that didn’t rely on just words? Granted, he highly doubted it would work on a monster, but it was still

worth a try.

The Spymaster silently left the room, leaving Boxxy all on its own. One would imagine this would be the Mimic's perfect chance to make a break for it, but it did no such thing. It remained perfectly still, suspended inside its electrified cage. Of course it wanted to escape, to break free and get away from that dangerous being that called itself a man, but it had no way of doing so.

Boxxy's MP was currently 0 and automatic MP recovery had been disabled. The cause was unknown, but that was its current reality. It had to admit, whoever or whatever was responsible for its imprisonment knew what they were doing, as Boxxy couldn't do anything to escape without MP. Storage was inaccessible, Acid Spray was unusable, Mend Flesh was disabled, Metal Mimicry wouldn't function, and Spells were right out. The only Skill that still had a use was Shapeshift, but that wouldn't let it break out of this specially prepared cage.

How come it was always those insufferable grates that got in its way?

Several minutes passed in total silence before Boxxy once again heard the sound of a metal door opening in the distance.

"Please don't! I didn't do anything!" came a familiar, squeaky voice. "You can't do this to me!"

"I can, actually," answered Edward's voice. "You are my prisoner, after all."

He appeared before Boxxy once more, carrying Fizzy by the scruff of her neck as if she were a large bag. The gnome's work clothes were gone, replaced by a rough-looking brown poncho that covered her torso and upper thighs. It looked less like a piece of clothing and more like an old potato sack. Her arms and shoulders were bare and her legs were exposed from the thighs down. Her bruised ankles and wrists were cuffed by cast iron shackles and bound together by sturdy-looking chains that rattled forebodingly as she was swung about.

"Nooo!" she screamed the moment her eyes met Boxxy's. "No! Get it away! Please!" She struggled desperately, waving her arms and legs all about and shaking her head.

"Quiet down, prisoner," said Edward.

“But! That thing! It’s evil! Get it- GET IT AWAY! OOF!”

She was thrown roughly to the ground, landing just centimetres away from the cage.

“I said shut up. Before I *make* you.”

The gnome whimpered in pain and curled up into the foetal position. ‘This isn’t happening!’ had been repeating inside her head over and over ever since she woke up in her cell. She wished she could at least tell her side of the story, but nobody was willing to listen. They didn’t even tell her why she was here.

“Better,” the Spymaster said coldly. “Now then, you in the cage. Do you know this girl?”

“Yes.”

The calm, oddly monotone voice made the gnome freeze and caused her manic thoughts to grind to a halt.

“Is she important to you?”

“Yes.”

“ … What is this girl’s relationship to you?” asked the old man in spite of himself.

“Was teacher. Now betrayer.”

Fizzy looked up at the suspended monster despite herself. She wanted to retort somehow, but the words wouldn’t come out of her throat. Objectively looking at it, that was exactly what she was. It also meant this creature, despite everything, had trusted her in some way. There could be no betrayal without trust, after all. She then curled up even harder to chase away those dangerous thoughts; nothing good could come from thinking of monsters as anything other than heartless.

“Teacher, eh?”

As for Edward, his mind was already putting the puzzle together. Of course, he was well aware of what this gnome was capable of. The Appraisal check she went through while unconscious made it clear exactly what her Job and Skills were.

“So she taught you the Artificer Job?”

“Yes.”

“Was that all she taught you about?”

“Yes.”

“Does her teaching relate in any way to the Calamity of Monotal?”

“No.”

“C-c-calamity!” stammered Fizzy. Her thoughts started running wild again.

“Oh?” asked Edward, smoothly shifting his focus to the gnome on the ground. “You didn’t know that this mimic was involved in that?”

“No! I had no idea!”

“Hmm, come to think of it …” The man’s voice trailed off as he began searching through his notebook. He found the entry concerning the site of a smashed up caravan that had been found on the Imperial highway between Monotal and Erosa.

“Ah, here we go. Rory and Lark Fizzlespricket. Your family, I presume?”

The gnome’s eyes went wide when her deceased father and brother were mentioned out of the blue. Anger flared up in her heart at him for besmirching their family name like that, but she quickly quelled it. Pointlessly antagonizing her captor was a really stupid idea.

“ … Yes,” she answered meekly.

“Interesting. You know, we never actually found any of the bodies. You wouldn’t know anything about that. Would you, gnome?” He considered the possibility of them being somehow connected to the Calamity and faking their deaths to go underground. Surely they must have mentioned something to their only living kin if they had such designs.

“Of course not!”

Operative word being ‘if.’

“What about you?” asked the Spymaster, turning to Boxxy. “Did *you* have anything to do with a three-wagon caravan along the Imperial highway north of here?”

“Yes.”

Fizzy’s eyes became even wider as she gazed at Boxxy in complete shock.

“Was this after the Cal– the destruction of Monotal?”

“Yes.”

He was convinced they were talking about the same thing. All merchant traffic going in and out of Erosa was logged, and that convoy was the only one that fit both the timing and the description. Well, it had taken a while to confirm this since they never found one of the wagons, but the personal effects recovered from the scene left no doubt as to the owner’s identity.

“So you were at the site of that ambush?”

“Yes.”

“Did you come upon it before it was attacked?”

“No.”

“After the attack?”

“No.”

“Ah, so you happened upon it while it was already under attack?”

“Yes.”

He scribbled some more details in his notebook while Fizzy listened intensely. She was so nervous she felt like her heart was going to leap through her skull.

“Did you kill everyone there?”

“No.”

She relaxed a bit ...

“But you killed some of them?”

“Yes.”

... then panicked.

“Did that include two male gnomes?”

“No.”

Then came relief ...

“So they’re still alive?”

“No.”

... followed by grim acceptance ...

“Then where are their bodies?”

“I ate them.”

... that instantly turned into rage.

“YOU BASTARD!” screamed Fizzy, unable to handle this rollercoaster of emotions.

A boot forced her down to the cold stone ground. It mercilessly pressed upon her back, squeezing the air out of her lungs. It was as if a mountain had just sat down on top of her, robbing her of the ability to speak or even breathe properly. Although it did little to stem the flow of tears streaming from her eyes.

She’d known they were dead. Even if the bodies were never found, she just knew. But hearing that this creature had brazenly eaten them felt like the ultimate insult to their memory.

“So they were dead when you found them?”

“Yes.”

“What about the adventurer escort? Did you kill them?”

“Yes.”

“Bandits as well?”

“Yes.”

“You ate all of those people, too?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because they were there.”

That was it. Nothing more, nothing less. Boxxy was a monster. A creature that attacked others without warning and for little reason ... the kind of

thing that only saw the lives of others as an obstacle between itself and its goals.

The metal door outside of the Mimic's field of vision opened up once more, followed by numerous sets of footsteps. A squad of several armoured guards stood in front of the Spymaster and saluted him respectfully.

"Spymaster Allen, sir!" said the one with the extra-shiny hat. "We're ready for you."

"Excellent. I think we're about done here. Show this creature to the site, I will be there shortly. And do be careful with the cage – don't want to lose any fingers."

"Yes, sir!"

Edward picked the gnome up off the floor and left the jail cell to give the men enough space. Four men walked into the room and stared at the bizarre creature with looks of clear apprehension. One of them went over to the box that was stuck to the side of the cage, unlocked it, and flipped one of the switches on the inside. The electrical current coursing through the metal bars died down immediately. The cage was then picked up and carried out of the dank cell and towards the surface.

"Where are they taking it?" Fizzy asked in a quivering voice once they had gone.

Edward dropped her roughly on the ground. "Nowhere that's of any concern to you, prisoner."

Fizzy sat up and glared at the man. "Why am I even here?"

"You seriously don't know?"

"No. Nobody has told me anything about it!"

"Why, it's because you have to pay for your crimes, of course!"

"What crimes?"

"Let's start with gross negligence that led to the death of others."

" … What?"

"Your incompetence sent that creature into a murderous rampage that not only cost the lives of at least twenty of the city's protectors but also caused

a riot that resulted in the death of fifteen more civilians and dozens more injured."

"Wuh … what? You're pinning that thing's behaviour on *me*?"

"Are you saying your rash actions did not set that chain of events into motion?"

"B-b-but-but what was I supposed to do? Some monster was messing with my brain!"

"Did you not think to hire adventurers?"

Fizzy was struck speechless. Of *course* that had been the best possible solution. That much was painfully obvious now that someone else had pointed it out. Even if she was worried the guards wouldn't believe her words, there was no way sell-swords wouldn't believe her gold. Dealing with monsters was their speciality, after all. If one thought about things logically then, one could indeed say her failure to handle the monster had set off a dreadful chain of events.

She refused to believe it, though. "I'm not buying it!" she insisted. "How is any of that negligence? If anyone's at fault it's the shitty guards who can't do the jobs my taxes are paying them for!"

It was a valid argument. Keeping monsters outside the walls or subduing them should they get in was the responsibility of local law enforcement. There was no way a peace-loving citizen could be expected to rationally handle a situation where they found themselves confronted with a monster. This victim blaming nonsense that was being thrown at her was ridiculous, to say the least.

Edward, however, completely ignored her protests and continued piling it on.

"You also taught it a Job without verifying its identity with an Appraisal. Moreover, you failed to register yourself as a Mentor, nor did you apply for the appropriate teaching license."

Okay, he had a point there. Those things were undoubtedly illegal, but the treatment she was getting did not match those administrative misdemeanours.

“Then let me pay my fines and get on with my life!” she insisted.

“And it is the result of my observations that I have found you guilty of colluding with a foreign power to knowingly and willingly spread chaos within His Majesty’s territory.”

With a completely deadpan voice, this human had just said the most ludicrous thing she’d ever heard. Fizzy understood at once that her imprisonment was never a matter of guilt or innocence but simply this man’s whim. And she couldn’t do anything about it. After all, if someone in power wanted a commoner – especially a non-human like her – thrown in prison, then they could make up any myriad of reasons and nobody would bat an eye.

“Why?” she asked with a shaky voice. “What do you want from me!”

“Ah see, we have a good, old-fashioned war brewing, and I would very much like your assistance with the war preparations.”

As wondrous as they were, the vast majority of an Artificer’s creations were weapons. Instruments of death and destruction that could be used by anyone after a bit of training. It was a relatively young profession whose military applications had not been fully explored yet. Edward was quite keen to get ahead of the curve in that regard, and this pink-haired gnome was the perfect pawn to assist with unlocking that potential in secret. Granted, it wasn’t a project high on his priority list, but he wouldn’t pass up the opportunity that presented itself to him.

“You can’t make me do that!” Fizzy insisted.

“Oh, but I can,” answered Edward. “You’re a convicted prisoner. Military service is your sentence.”

The gnome’s heart sank.

Her father always believed Artificers could be more than merchants of death. That their craft could be used for the betterment of life, instead of simply ending it. He dedicated his life’s work towards that noble goal. All of his research and experiments were simply intended to create devices of convenience and nothing more. And while he did design and build a few weapons, those were only meant as a means of self-defence with the

intention to stun and incapacitate, rather than kill. He was no pacifist, but that did not mean he wanted to be a murderer.

A naive and foolish ideal that had been hammered into Fizzy since her birth.

“Don’t worry,” said the old man with a rotten smile on his face. “I’m sure you’ll work off your debt to society after a few decades of hard labour!”

He tossed her inside the cell Boxxy had been in just a minute ago and shut the door, then walked off after the other guards.

Part Three

The Emperor’s Spymaster walked out of the dungeon and into the courtyard of Erosa’s central castle. The ground was hard-packed dirt with not a scrap of vegetation left after being trampled on by countless pairs of feet on a daily basis. He made his way across the open space and went into the seventeen-metre-tall white stone tower that housed the city’s branch of the Arcaneum.

The Arcaneum was a government-controlled guild in charge of magical study and research. Although Jobs and Skills came ‘pre-packaged’ with their own crafting recipes, enchantments, and Spells, that did not mean it was impossible to develop new ones. It was considerably difficult, time-consuming, and expensive, but it was definitely possible. This was the Arcaneum’s primary function but by no means the only one. The organization’s secondary duty was to investigate, document, and, if necessary, contain and/or dissect the bizarre and illogical.

In a way, it was an oddly fitting place for Boxxy’s upcoming Appraisal, as it was clearly an anomalous creature. Initially, the Spymaster had foregone analyzing his monstrous prisoner’s Status because he thought it a waste of time. After all, it was borderline impossible to properly assess a monster’s natural Job and Skills if the one doing the inspection was an enlightened.

‘Enlightened’ was the general term used to collectively refer to the civilized races of this world. The ones that flocked together, hid behind walls and achieved their goals as a species mostly through wits, intelligence, and tools. They had a completely different way of thinking and understanding

from the predominantly violent and highly instinctive monsters they shared a world with. It was a gap between their mental states that was impossible to bridge, which was why Appraisal – be it Basic or Full – tended to be mostly useless on monsters. If attempted, the only outcome the appraiser would get was a head filled with garbled gibberish.

There was one exception to this, however. If the Scribe performing the check was extremely knowledgeable about the monster being appraised, then it was possible to lift the veil on its Skills and Jobs. The catch was that such a level of understanding could only be achieved after years of study, research, and autopsy of that specific species of monster. Unfortunately, Edward's personal Scribe was no scholar, so the most she would normally get out of a monster's Status was its HP and MP. Maybe the Attribute scores if they were lucky.

As it turned out, however, the Spymaster's box-shaped prisoner had two enlightened Jobs. The interrogation had revealed that it was both a Warlock and an Artificer, in addition to somehow being involved in the Calamity. Hence the reason Edward found himself very eager to find out exactly what the Appraisal might reveal.

He walked into the Arcaneum tower and went to its basement. This served as a ceremonial chamber used to perform the various rituals and rites the tower's residents required. It was a wide open space about ten-by-fifteen metres in size and an abnormally high ceiling almost four metres tall. Stone support columns dotted the inside and rows of bookshelves lined the walls. Tomes, parchments, paints, bushels of dried herbs, bowls of powdered substances, chunks of ores, jars of pickled monster parts, and a plethora of other resources, ingredients, and reagents were all lined up and waiting to be put to use. Plain-looking chandeliers adorned with white magical lights dangled from the ceiling, bathing the subterranean chamber with so much light it appeared brighter than the outdoors. The floor itself was covered in dull grey brickwork, almost like the dungeon Edward had just left. A significant part of it was charred, scratched, cracked, or otherwise stained with various dried up substances – likely remnants of past rituals.

The Spymaster looked around and spotted a group of five individuals in the far corner, huddled around the familiar black cage. He approached them briskly, eager to move his interrogation of the monster to the next step.

He'd given the order to prepare this space the instant he realised his prisoner was a Warlock, but it took a while to have those wand-twirlers vacate the chamber. It would not be an exaggeration to say this was a national security situation, so minimizing potential intelligence leaks was a given. Ideally, he wouldn't have done this in such a relatively public place, but this spot was necessary for what he planned to do.

"Sir!"

The four guards that had escorted the monster there saluted him respectfully when they noticed his approach.

He returned the salute. "Thank you, gentlemen. That will be all. Leave us, and inform the rest of the Arcaneum we are not to be disturbed. Do not let anyone in here unless it is literally a matter of life or death. Or else it will *become* one. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!"

The guardsmen quickly made their way out without uttering another peep. They didn't quite know who this stranger was, but none dared speak up against him. They'd been told he was their superior in both rank and ability, which was all they needed to know. Besides, it was common knowledge around the keep that he had subdued that vicious creature with a single blow. He was far more intimidating in person though, to the point that a few of them were inwardly questioning which one was the real monster.

Edward waited for the men to leave the basement, then turned to face the last person remaining in the chamber. She was a woman of average height and build, shoulder-length black hair and slanted yellow eyes. Her face was mature and attractive, but her ice-cold expression was severe enough to send chills down one's spine. Her outfit consisted of an armour set nearly identical in design to Edward's, clearly marking her as one of his subordinates.

"Zone, are you ready for the Appraisal yet?" he asked matter-of-factly.

The woman nodded.

"Get to it then, and give me the short version."

The female operative walked up to the caged monster, which studied her curiously with its out of place head. She unlocked the powered-down cage

and walked inside. She reached out over its head and placed a hand on its lid, an act which caused Boxxy quite a bit of distress. It instinctively wanted to lash out and hurt this woman, but an overpowering glare from that man quickly erased any such rebellious thoughts. Besides, it wasn't like it would hurt, right? Adventurers supposedly did this sort of thing all the time, after all.

The woman called Zone opened her mouth and quietly chanted two words. "Full Appraisal."

Boxxy immediately felt an extremely disturbing sensation. As if countless tiny insects had come out of her hand and spread out across its surface, then burrowed into its faux-wood shell. The invisible bugs that weren't actually there enveloped it completely, crawling and tasting it all over. A few seconds later, the woman started reporting on its Status in a quiet, monotone voice.

"Name - Boxxy T. Morningwood. Greater Mimic, 3 months old. HP at 1,524. MP at 1,210. Monster Job – unknown. Assumed Level 40 to 50 based on the number of unknowable Skills. Level 25 Warlock. Summon Familiar 7, Power Overwhelming 6, Demonology 6, Crystallize Magic 5. Level 12 Artificer. Clockwork Expertise 3, Explosives Handling 2. General Skills consist of Stealth 7, an unknowable Skill assumed to be Shapeshift and a total of six Mastery Skills, ranging from 3 to 8."

Having finished her duty, she took her hand off the chest. The disgusting sensations permeating Boxxy's body stopped instantly, leaving it with a feeling of somehow being violated. It was not a tasty sensation.

"Hmm … It's quite tough for its Level isn't it?" mused the Spymaster. "I'm starting to see how it could kill so many guards so quickly. Also, a total of over seventy-five levels in three months? Well, all things considered, that's perhaps even a little low. Zone, is *that* there?"

"Yes. Butcher of Humanity Perk is present."

"So it was that after all, huh?"

The Slayer series of Perks were received after killing hundreds upon thousands of beings of the same species. The first rank, known as 'Slayer,' was awarded after one had killed 500 of a specific species. Getting that kill count up to 2,000 would upgrade the perk to 'Hunter.' Racking up 5,000

would turn one into a ‘Butcher,’ and 20,000 would turn them into a ‘Natural Enemy.’ However, although these Perks did raise one’s prowess when fighting a specific species, they also had an additional side effect that was not readily apparent.

Much like Taboo, the Slayer series of Perks altered the way others perceived the holder, and it grew stronger with each upgrade stage. In this monster’s case, humans would feel an instinctive fear that caused them to shy away from it. Edward himself felt it, although it took him a while to notice since his Nerves of Steel Skill dulled the effects of external mental influences like that. It wasn’t until he had spoken to the creature for a few minutes that he did start feeling an odd sense of unease, followed by beads of cold sweat forming in his palms for no apparent reason. It affected him even though he had reached Job Level 100 and Ranked Up to become an ascendant – a being significantly stronger, faster, and smarter than a regular human.

Edward rubbed his temple. “I should have just started with the Appraisal,” he grumbled.

He felt foolish for thinking it wouldn’t yield any useful information. He trusted his common sense and wasted his own time, but it was hardly a bad call. After all, who would’ve thought this simple creature would be capable of gaining not only one, but two Jobs that would normally be inaccessible to such a monster? The Artificer one had clearly been taught by the gnome, which meant the Warlock one was likely taught by some equally naive Warlock trainer. Or a malicious one.

Still, after interrogating both its mind and body, he was finally convinced. This creature was the culprit behind the Calamity. He wasn’t sure how the simple being eluded his Eyes of Truth earlier though. Actually, being simple-minded was probably why it gave him so much trouble in the first place. Regardless of its mental faculties, this ‘Boxxy’ was guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt. There was simply no other way it could have killed five thousand people in just three months.

Edward was personally familiar with just how high a number that was. He himself was only a Slayer of Humanity and a Slayer of Elfkind, despite having performed assassinations and carrying out raids on criminal hideouts for many decades. That was fine by him though, as he didn’t want to

‘upgrade’ them if at all possible. Perks like that were more trouble than they were worth sometimes. In fact, some of them could be almost as damning as a high Level of Taboo. They were evidence of one’s past actions that would be easily laid bare with a Full Appraisal, regardless of the holder’s wishes.

And yet he’d held off having one done on this mimic until he deemed it was absolutely necessary. After all, a Full Appraisal could only be performed once every twenty-four hours. Guilds could afford to have multiple Scribes on their payroll, but Edward could not risk any of this information leaking out. He only brought one subordinate with him who was capable of performing a Full Appraisal, so he had to be prudent with its usage.

And now that it was done, he would take full advantage of it.

“Zone, does it have any other Perks?”

“Yes, five in total. One unknowable, Arcane Assassin, Butcher of Humanity, Collateral Damage, and Grand Theft Arcana.”

“Wait, no Hero Killer?”

“Negative.”

The Perk in question had no effects beyond marking someone as taking part in slaying a chosen of the Gods. It was one of those troublesome stigmas on one’s Status that could be used as evidence to get them convicted of manslaughter on the spot. This monster not having it was surprising though. Then again, Bernard Samson, the chosen Hero of Teresa, had supposedly been revived by the Goddess almost instantly, so it was possible the Perk was invalidated or the kill ‘didn’t count.’ Edward had never heard of the divines outright reviving a person like that, so it was hard for him to accurately say one way or the other.

Rather than dwell on what was missing, the Spymaster considered what was already there. The Perk that Zone referred to as unknowable was likely something exclusive to monsters, or she would’ve recognized it. Collateral Damage was … to be expected of something that blew up an entire city. Arcane Assassin was something one of his other subordinates possessed and that Perk made sense, considering the Mimic was a Warlock with Stealth. It was likewise possible that one of its unreadable Skills was the Assassination Skill, which Edward also had as part of his Rogue Job. Unfortunately, even

if this creature had the same ability, it would have come from its Monster Job and would be incomprehensible to a meathead like Zone.

However, it was the last Perk in that list that piqued his interest the most.

“Grand Theft Arcana?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

Zone’s eyes stared off into the distance as she focused her attention on Boxxy’s Status screen that was still in her mind.

“Awarded for taking a dungeon core out of its dungeon,” she reported in the same dull monotone. “Reward is a plus ten to all Attributes. The subject has performed this feat once.”

“Such a thing can happen, huh? I see, so that’s what it was.”

When the Hero, Bernard Samson, described the giant orb thought to be the source of the Calamity, it painted the image of an oversized dungeon core. Edward was no expert on the matter, but general knowledge dictated that the size of those things was directly proportional to the amount of mystical energy they controlled. Therein lay the problem though, as the Litigar Dungeon Complex next to Monotal, which would be the most likely origin of said core, was much too weak to produce one of that size. The place had completely caved in from the blast and was within range of the ever-swirling death cloud, so there was no way to verify if its core was still there.

At least until this monster’s Status had given Edward all the confirmation he needed.

Not that Boxxy had any idea that its deed had been exposed. It was still immensely nervous, however. It had just been through its first and highly unpleasant Appraisal, the thing that it had determined must be avoided at all costs. It was afraid of what would happen to it, of whether this terrifying human and that similarly dressed woman would just kill it off on the spot. Still, it held onto a feeling vaguely resembling hope. They clearly wanted something from it or they would have eliminated it already. It was the same reasoning the Mimic itself had used when it tried to run away with that gnome in tow.

“Interesting,” Edward mused as he tapped his chin. “Very interesting indeed. We’ll have to bring it back to headquarters so Hook can extract the

details from it. We might even be able to avoid asking Arcaneum for assistance."

It seemed Boxxy was right in assuming its life would be spared, at least for the moment. If they were transporting it somewhere else, then that could present it with a good opportunity to escape.

"In the meantime, let's make sure it doesn't try to pull anything too clever. Zone, get rid of those two Jobs."

The Mimic's head swivelled around to look up at the black-haired woman standing next to it with a panicked stare. Get rid of Jobs? Was such a thing really possible?

"What if the Warlock Job is necessary?" she asked.

"Irrelevant. We just need its memory. Do it."

Judging from their exchange and the mechanical way that woman was moving her hands towards it, Boxxy quickly concluded that its Jobs were indeed in danger. It felt a type of fear distinctly different than that of death. It was something it hadn't felt since its connection to its home dungeon was severed – the fear of the unknown. That wasn't all, though. It also felt anger. Rage, even. How dare these damned humans attempt to separate it from what was rightfully its own? Did they even know how much time, effort, money, and murder it had to go through to get those Jobs to their current state?

Desperate and cornered, it lashed out. A dozen fleshy tendrils sprang forth from its surface and wrapped around the woman's hands, feet, and neck. Now that it had hold of a hostage, it just needed to –

"Hnng!" it groaned. "Eh? … HNNNNG!"

It tried to spin her around, pin her down and threaten her, but it couldn't. She didn't budge a muscle no matter how much it pulled on her limbs. In fact, if anyone was getting pulled in this situation, it was the Mimic whose suspended body leaned closer towards Zone. The monster should have been the heavier one, yet Boxxy felt as if it was trying to pull down a mountain.

At the unexpected assault, Zone had briefly stopped her movements, but she did not appear to mind the interruption. No, that wasn't quite right. The unfazed way she carried on despite the shapeshifter's utmost effort made it

seem like she didn't even register its attempts at taking her hostage. As if this monster's full strength was little more than a bad joke to her. That may actually have been the case, given the tiny smile on her normally expressionless face.

In the end, she placed her hand upon the chest once more, completely unhindered by its attempts at 'restraining' her.

"Job Removal: Warlock."

A trio of previously inert runes etched into the stone floor under the cage lit up in response to her quiet words. A white light flowed forth from them and enveloped Boxxy, drowning out the creature's senses and assaulting its consciousness.

[Proficiency level decreased. Crystallize Magic is no longer available. INT -10. WIS -10.]
[Proficiency level decreased. Demonology is now Level 5. WIS -2. MNT -2.]
[Proficiency level decreased. Power Overwhelming is no longer available. INT -24.]
[Proficiency level decreased. Summon Familiar is no longer available. INT -14. WIS -7. MNT -7.]
[Your Warlock Job has been removed. INT -50. MNT -50. END -50.]

It was over in an instant. The stress of having its Skills and Attributes removed all at once rendered the monster unconscious. Its tendrils uncoiled themselves from Zone and hung limply down to the ground. The next time it woke up, it would find that all the knowledge it had regarding magic and demons was now gone, obliterated from its mind as if it was never there.

Well, almost all of it.

"Odd," said Zone. "Demonology won't go below Level 5."

"What? Why not?" Edward asked.

"Unknown."

"But the Warlock Job and its other Skills were successfully removed?"

"Yes."

"Hmm …"

Edward had made sure to brush up on his knowledge of Warlocks and their familiars ever since he heard demons were involved in the Monotal case. As such, he was familiar with the Summon Familiar and Demonology Skills and had already deduced his monstrous prisoner was in possession of them during the interview. Exactly why the second of those refused to go away completely was beyond his understanding, but it wasn't necessarily an issue.

"It's good enough," he stated. "Demonology is practically useless on its own anyway."

The monster would probably retain some knowledge pertaining to demonic rituals and lore, but the Skill's main function was to upgrade Summon Familiar. Which was no longer in its possession. Not only did it now lack the means to call out its pet demons, but their contracts would be severed as well.

"Do the next one," he commanded, and Zone complied.

"Job Removal: Artificer."

[Proficiency level decreased. Explosives Handling is no longer available. DEX -4. WIS -4.]

[Proficiency level decreased. Clockwork Expertise is no longer available. DEX -6. PER -6.]

[Your Artificer Job has been removed. DEX-24. WIS -24. PER -24.]

More untasty notifications flashed inside the Mimic's mind, but its owner was currently out for the count.

"Done. No abnormalities," Zone reported.

"Good," said Edward while staring absentmindedly at the unconscious monster. "Very good indeed. Looks like we're done here."

Zone tilted her head. "We are? What about the elf connection?"

"Non-existent. As expected, this entire incident was either a fluke or an accident rather than an elven conspiracy."

Of course, the Spymaster never quite believed those knife-ears were actually responsible for something like the Calamity of Monotal. He'd kept his mind open to the possibility, but a man of his experience was able to

easily sense that the young Hero had been deceived. And while it certainly helped that he caught and spoke with the real perpetrator, he really didn't need to do that in order to doubt the young man's words. The testimony still served to pin the blame on the twig-infested nation to the north, but that was a bit divorced from reality.

To begin with, the cowards of the Ishigar Republic to the north would never dare incur the wrath of the Lodrak Empire. Their territory may have been larger than the Empire's at a glance, but they were far behind when it came to matters of military strength. And while such acts of terrorism were right up their alley, they were far too competent to be responsible for the farce at Monotal. If an agent of theirs was indeed responsible for the Calamity, then there was no way they'd ever allow it to be traced back to them. Elves took their spying and skulking in the shadows *very* seriously.

Then there was the matter of these supposed perpetrators' choice of target. Considering the destructive power of the Calamity, hitting a place like Monotal made very little sense. That city had very little strategic or economic value in the grand scheme of things. If they truly had the capability and the intention of wounding the Empire in such a way, then the Republic would have gone after a more valuable region. It made a lot more sense to blow up the royal capital and gouge out the heart of the Empire. It was what Edward would have done in their position.

In fact, that was more or less what he was planning to do to the Republic at this very moment.

"Sir, requesting permission to keep suspect as a pet."

His subordinate's bizarre question made Edward's scheming grind to a halt. The black-haired woman was gently stroking the unconscious Mimic's imitation wood surface with a tiny smile on her face.

"Really, Zone? This again?"

"Affirmative."

"Haah. Alright, I'll bite. Why?"

"I have determined it is quite cute."

So it *was* that after all. This problem child always had a twisted sense of aesthetics. It wasn't the first time she'd made the ludicrous request to keep a

murderous monster around as a pet. Normally he might consider it if Zone was a Monster Tamer like her colleague with the codename Bandit, but she wasn't.

"Also, there is a high chance that it likes me," she added.

"I highly doubt that. It just tried to take you hostage. That's not something you normally do to people you like."

"It did? When?"

"You know, when it wrapped those tentacles around you?"

He wiggled his fingers for emphasis, causing his subordinate to blink her yellow eyes in confusion.

"That wasn't a hug? But it was so squishy and warm …"

Edward sighed. Did she really not notice? While it was true that the monster had no chance of overpowering her outrageous STR Attribute, that didn't mean it was being nice. Honestly, how come she was this ignorant even though she was also a 'Ranker' like him? It boggled the mind how dense this woman could be sometimes.

"No, Zone, it wasn't showing affection. It tried to hurt you."

"I don't mind. I promise I'll discipline it. Therefore –"

"Forget it. We'll be disposing of that thing once Hook is done rooting around in its mind for the Calamity method."

The man with the codename Hook was another subordinate of Edward's. His primary Job was a Psionic, a rare occupation from the southern continent that utilized mind-based Skills and Spells in combat. Their Domination magic was powerful and versatile, easily dwarfing a Warlock's potential for mind-fuckery. The task of sifting through the monster's memories to get details surrounding the Calamity was child's play for a Psionic of Hook's calibre. Granted, such forceful methods usually left the subject a drooling vegetable, but Edward was going to execute the thing once he was done with it anyway.

"…"

His female colleague should've known all this, yet she kept staring expectantly at him.

“Don’t give me that pleading look, Zone. You know we can’t risk the truth of the Calamity leaking out.”

The elves destroyed a human city and murdered thousands of humans.

This was the ‘official’ story he’d fed to the immature and hot-blooded Emperor. It wouldn’t be long before that lie was propagated throughout the Empire and spoon-fed to its citizens. With the entire country’s disdain and distrust towards the elves rising, it would be the perfect opportunity to finally engage in open warfare and wipe those twigs off the face of this world. Once that was over, the Empire would be in a position to gobble up or vassalize the remaining nations, securing its dominion over the continent.

Some small part of Edward actually wanted to thank that moronic mimic. Not only did it inadvertently give his country a plausible reason to get the populace to support this war, but it was also going to provide them with a weapon of mass destruction. If the Calamity could be replicated and weaponised, then even world domination would be within the Empire’s grasp.

Or at least, that was the way he would manipulate that juvenile of an Emperor into seeing things. As far as Edward was concerned, all these wars on the horizon were nothing more than a way for him to further his Jobs and Skills. He was so close to achieving a second Rank Up that he could almost taste it, but a man of his position found it difficult to raise the Spy Job and its related Skills during such peaceful times. He was so close to a Breakthrough, and then he just had to diligently work at becoming a Level 100 Spy, at which point he would achieve his second Rank Up.

Of course, one could argue he should have picked an easier Job to Level Up, but being a Spy gave him benefits beyond Skills and Attributes. To begin with, the Job was a closely guarded secret of the very elves he would use it against. He had no time for such things. Being able to steal it away from them decades ago was what allowed him to become Spymaster in the first place. It was a position of power with many benefits, such as first-rate equipment and information, not to mention the freedom to act as he saw fit.

There was also the benefit that, strictly speaking, Spy was not a combat-oriented Job. It still gained some XP from murdering the ever-living piss out of stuff, but it was the act of infiltration and subterfuge that made it go

up in Level to any significant extent. The need and opportunity for such acts would increase tremendously during open warfare, as well as during the months leading up to the 'official' start of the campaign. Hopefully enough to allow the Spymaster to obtain his second Level 100 Job

This was Edward's primary concern, as he was running short on time. Even if his lifespan may have been extended after he Ranked Up into an ascendant, he was already over a century old. His body and mind were both in good enough condition to allow him to remain on active duty, but his time until forced retirement and subsequent death was rapidly running out. However, once he achieved his goals and maxed out his second Job, he would be allowed to Rank Up once more. At that point, he would not only gain another Ultimate Skill but would also evolve into an immortal being that no longer had to fear the passage of time. After that, he would have literally all the time in the world to work on achieving the mythical third and final Rank Up an enlightened could attain.

Until then, however, he had to be prudent, patient, and careful.

"Now go fetch those guardsmen and tell them to drag our friend back to its cell," he ordered. "Prepare both it and the gnome for transport back to the capital. I want them out of here by tomorrow."

Part Four

"Teach!" demanded Boxxy.

"No!" replied Fizzy in a shrill voice. "Don't wanna! Go away!"

"I want to! But! Cage!"

The Mimic swayed front to back while suspended inside its special cage as if to make a point. Not too hard though – the highly untasty zappy stuff was back, and it didn't want any part of that.

Boxxy had been in a rage ever since it woke up half an hour ago and found itself back in the cell minus two Jobs. It was still coming to terms with its more … limited brain capacity. After all, it had lost about a third of its INT and a good chunk of WIS. Its mental processes had regressed back to what

they were three weeks ago, just after the Calamity that started this whole mess.

And it did not like that. Not one bit.

“Teeeach!” yelled Xera’s misplaced head again.

It wanted to reclaim what it once had. The Warlock Job? It had no idea where it would get that. The first time was a total lucky fluke; it was highly unlikely for that to happen again. At least Artificer could be recovered easily enough as long as that insufferable gnome granted it the Job again.

“Please! Just leave me alone!”

She was, understandably, not especially willing to do so. Fizzy hadn’t had the chance to come to terms with the horrible reality of her unjust imprisonment before those guards came back and left this terrifying box in the same cell with her. She begged them to put her in a different place, but the humans just stared at each other awkwardly before locking them in together and walking away. A man bearing His Majesty’s royal seal had given them an order, and they carried it out. Nothing more, nothing less. Even though all of them sympathized with her, none of them were willing to risk incurring the wrath of someone who wielded the Emperor’s authority.

“HHHRRAAAHRG!” roared the Mimic.

“Shut up!” snapped Fizzy. “Shaddap-shaddap-shaddap!”

“No! Teach! Me! Art! Fisher!”

“Idiot!”

CLANG

BDZT

“Ow!”

Now, *why* had Fizzy gone and kicked the cage? She knew full well it was electrified. Maybe the real idiot was her after all?

“Okay, look!”

The gnome decided it would probably be better to just explain, so she lifted her bound arms for emphasis.

“You see these things? These are mana-sealing shackles, you dimwit! Not only do they drain your MP, but they also disable its recovery! And I can’t activate my Mentor Skill without MP! Therefore, I can’t give you the Job even if I wanted to! Which – big surprise – I don’t!”

“You lie! Betrayer! Liar! Untasty, nasty thing!”

“You have the same stuff bolted onto you, moron! You don’t have your MP, either, right?”

“ … No.”

“So if you understand then please just shut the fuck up!”

“…”

And it did indeed go silent. The gnome stared at it, her small shoulders going up and down as she steadied her agitated breathing. She really should have just said that stuff at the start. Boxxy was always good at listening to her, so it wouldn’t ask again once it had no choice but to accept her words. Alas, once the gnome finally calmed herself down, she was instead gripped by anxiety and uncertainty.

She had just yelled at and insulted a monster that could gobble her up in one mouthful. That realisation was more than enough to cause her to back off into the far corner of the cell and lay down in the foetal position, facing away from her cellmate. At least this arrangement was entirely temporary. Those guards said something about moving both of them the next day, so all she had to do was grin and bear it until they were separated.

And then continue grinning and bearing it. For years. While she was forced to build war machines. And would likely be whipped and beaten if she did a poor job of it. That was only if she was lucky. If not, then she would probably be whipped and beaten regardless of how well she did. Would they even release her once her sentence was up? Would that sentence even end? Or was death the only thing that would set her free?

“How fast?”

Fizzy looked over her shoulder at those words. The Mimic had regained its composure and was asking her something with a determined face. Granted, it was the borrowed face of its once-familiar, but it was a determined one nonetheless.

“ … How fast what?” answered Fizzy, despite herself.

“How fast does MP go away?”

“What does it matter?”

“How fast?” it repeated.

“Why should I tell you?”

“Talk is free. Nothing to lose.”

“…”

The monster had a point, but communicating with it any more than this was ill-advised. Yet she couldn’t just sit there quietly. The mentor inside her still wanted to answer the student. More importantly than that though, if she didn’t speak up now, that stupid box would probably start shouting like a spoiled child all over again. If Fizzy was going to wallow in her own misery, then it would be better if she did so without having a horrible creature screaming at her.

“I think it was fifty per second or something like that.”

The room fell completely silent after that. The pale-faced head retreated back inside its shell, leaving the monster’s appearance as that of a simple, suspended chest. It appeared to have no more desire to speak with her, and Fizzy was more than happy to oblige. Conversation was the last thing she was looking for right now.

Okay, that wasn’t entirely true. She desperately wanted someone to at least hear out her troubles, but she wasn’t going to get a shred of sympathy from that thing. Monsters were wholly incapable of empathy, after all. Why did she have to share a cell with this horrible creature that had caused her so much pain? First it … Huh?

She sat up and looked at it curiously. Did it actually *do* anything to her?

No, no, no, Boxxy had clearly stated it was responsible for the death of her father and brother! That was more than enough reason to hate it, right? Wait, that wasn’t right. During the interrogation, it mentioned being at the scene of their deaths, but it claimed it didn’t kill them. It merely … ate them. Still, desecrating the dead like that was surely deserving of scorn, right? But it had also gone on a murdering spree and wiped out both the

bandits that killed her family and the adventurers that failed to protect them. As well as that shady bastard who lured them away in the first place.

Looking at things objectively, didn't Boxxy avenge their deaths? Anyone and everyone who could be held responsible for her father and brother's untimely demise was sitting somewhere at the bottom of that monster's gullet. Or at least, that was what it claimed. But if that scary government spy was willing to believe its claims, then nobody would blame Fizzy for doing the same, right?

"Argh!"

She screamed and rolled around on the ground. What was she thinking? There was no way that monster had acted out of anything other than self-interest. It would have definitely killed her family if the bandits hadn't gotten to them first. Regardless of that, it also *killed* and *ate* people. It had a lot of crimes to answer for, to be sure – especially for all those times it messed with her head!

Come to think of it, why did it do that? To protect its identity? If it was just that, then shouldn't it have been easier to kill her? If Fizzy had simply talked to it rather than betrayed it, then wasn't there a chance they could be practising their craft in her workshop right now instead of sitting in a jail cell awaiting some dismal fate? Maybe, just maybe, if she hadn't forced it to defend itself, then none of this would've happened. From what she was able to gather, it had even tried to carry her *away* from all that madness.

The more the confused gnome thought about it while curled up on that hard, damp floor, the less Boxxy seemed like a villain to her. For one thing, it had given her heaps of business. Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets was never a prosperous shop, and the unfortunate gnome was struggling to keep it afloat all on her own. The vast majority of her clients had cancelled their orders once they found out her father and brother were no more, so she'd really been in a pinch about how to maintain her father's legacy.

" … Boxxy, can I ask you something?"

The Mimic was currently trying to organize its fractured mind, so it didn't feel like engaging with the pink thing in the corner. All the information pertaining to magic and almost everything it knew about demons had

vanished in a flash of light, along with its knowledge of cogwheels, gears, sprockets, springs, and explosives.

No wait, it wasn't all gone. Those one-on-one tutoring sessions with Fizzy were still in the back of its mind. The conversations with Carl and most of the memories it had concerning its familiars were still there. The information Xera had gathered for it before it got captured was mostly intact as well. Perhaps it could recover from this after all?

"Why did you want to become an Artificer?" asked Fizzy.

She had taken the monster's lack of response for silent confirmation it would speak with her, when in truth it wasn't paying attention to her at all. If it could magnificently ignore a couple of demons having violent sex for hours on end, then some nosy little gnome was no trouble at all. But still, perhaps there was some merit in speaking with her. It was possible she would yield some more useful information, and the Mimic would need all the help it could get if it was to break out of this place. And if not, then it wouldn't have lost anything. In its own words, talking was free.

Xera's bald face emerged from the chest's front. The gnome didn't even flinch at the bizarre action, though she was a tiny bit surprised she was already used to it.

"Machines are tasty," it said simply.

" … What?"

"Machines are tasty."

"You … eat Artificer-made tools?"

"No."

"But you think they're tasty?"

"Yes."

"How can you claim they're tasty when you don't want to eat them?"

"Because they are."

" … What's with that inane reasoning?"

"You don't think art fishers are tasty?"

“Um, no?”

“Then why teach art fishing if you don’t think it’s tasty?”

“…”

The gnome decided it would be better for everyone involved if she just minded her own business after all. She lay down in the foetal position once again, but with one small change. This time she lay facing the Mimic so she could quietly stare at it. Boxxy didn’t seem to mirror that sentiment and returned to its mental cataloguing after making its head disappear.

The cell remained silent for the rest of the day and evening, save for the footsteps of the odd guard patrol, Fizzy’s own breathing, and the gentle hum of the electrified cage. The mentally exhausted gnome ended up focusing on that last one.

It was a nostalgic sound, for she was the one who built the thing over six months ago at the behest of the local Lord-Mayor. She never found out why he wanted an electrified cage, nor did she want to know. She just let that oddly comforting sound lull her to sleep. It was a minor thing, but it still reminded her of a better, happier time.

Perhaps it was because of that noise that she dreamt about the time she had an argument with her brother over what constituted a ‘clean work environment.’ How that guy managed to find anything inside that ‘organized chaos’ of his was a complete mystery. He even had the audacity to get angry when Cornie tidied up the mess of tools and parts that was his workstation. The argument got so intense that they nearly came to blows over it, but it was still a strangely happy dream.

“Look alive in there!”

One that was suddenly cut short when a guard shouted at her.

“Ack! Wha-! Oh …”

She was now back in the real world, much to her disappointment. At least she didn’t feel quite as depressed about it as yesterday. Somehow, watching the Mimic quietly sit there made her strangely calm, as she realised that wailing and thrashing about wasn’t going to help her in any way. Also, she really didn’t want to lose to Boxxy. If that stupid box could calmly await

what Fizzy assumed would be a much crueller fate than her own, then the least she could do was not be a crybaby about her predicament.

The guards escorted both her and the caged monster out of the dungeon and into the courtyard. Waiting for them there were a duo of griffins – barn-sized winged monsters that resembled the front half of an eagle. Their beak-tipped heads and long necks were covered in brilliantly white feathers that turned to a dark brown around their chest and forelegs. The front two feet ended in birdlike talons and were covered in brown plumage, much like their front shoulders. The rest of a griffin's torso and its hind legs were like that of a huge cat with a golden coat that seemed to glisten in the morning sun. It also had a long, slender tail tipped with a smattering of feathers but was otherwise feline in appearance.

If one were to describe these magnificent beasts in a single word, 'majestic' was the most fitting. That was probably why they were pictured prominently on the Empire's flag, though the images upon the blue banners hanging around the courtyard didn't do them justice. The feeling they gave off when met in person was completely different from some caricature. It was like they had the aura of a ruler, their very presence demanding people grovel before them.

Then again, that last bit was probably because of their sheer size. Standing with their heads held high put their eye level a good seven to eight metres off the ground. The massive feathered wings that were just above their front legs unfurled to a wingspan of nearly fifteen metres. No wonder griffin eyries were built only at the highest points of a castle; they wouldn't be able to land anywhere else.

Strapped to each of their wide backs like a pair of oversized backpacks were two specially designed cabins. The front one was made out of wood and had round glass windows. It was clearly intended to ferry passengers while shielding them from the frigid winds that usually accompanied high-altitude flight. The temperature inside was likely regulated through magical means to ensure maximum comfort. As for the other one, the only way to describe it would be like a giant steel box – a place to strap in the cargo and luggage of the passengers in the primary cabin.

"That's how we're being transported?" asked Fizzy with an oddly enthusiastic tone. "I've always wanted to ride a griffin!"

“Easy there, girlie,” said one of the guards escorting the two prisoners. “Don’t get your hopes up. You and that thing over there are riding with the cargo.”

And there went what little optimism the female gnome could muster. Now she really felt like crying.

She and Boxxy were brought before the gigantic beast that was currently lying down. A large wheeled ramp had been brought out to provide access to its back, which was a few metres off the ground. The guards dutifully escorted both prisoners up the wooden slope and unlocked the double doors at the back of the windowless metal container. They swung open to reveal a largely empty space. Beams of sunlight entered through a series of small holes along the sides near the top. It wasn’t hard to imagine those would be the only sources of air and light once the door was shut tight.

Boxxy’s cage was carried off to the far right corner of the container, as far away from the door as it could go. It was placed on a mat of processed Bouncewood bark. One that was, in a fit of irony, made from the same raw materials the monster itself had delivered. The cage was then strapped securely to the floor using a number of ropes that were coated in some type of resin. They wrapped around the bars of the cage and were tied to specially designed hooks that poked out of the floor and walls of the container itself. Once the cage was properly secured, one of the guards re-started its electric field. The floor mat and special ropes served to insulate the device, lest it electrify the entire container and the beast it was carrying.

As for Fizzy, she was also put in a cage that was attached to the floor, although this one was considerably smaller, likely intended for animals rather than people. It wasn’t strictly necessary though, as she had nowhere to escape to while flying thousands of metres up in the sky. Which was also partially why this container would be left unsupervised during the forty-hour flight back to the Imperial capital of Oshinas.

This was by no means negligence on the Spymaster’s part though, as he was confident Boxxy’s restraints would be sufficient. With its MP drained and unable to recover, the monster would be unable to fuel any of its active Skills. It could still use the passive ones like Shapeshift, but any attempts to break free or try something funny would be cut short by an electric jolt. In some ways, the gnome was far more likely to escape her shackles. An

Artificer was able to take apart pretty much anything, provided they had the right tools. Of which Fizzy had none, rendering her about as useful as a half-rotten potato.

In some ways, locking her up was unnecessary, but Edward made sure she was securely strapped in all the same, lest she do something profoundly stupid. At least he had the common courtesy to provide her with some basic necessities: A small cot filled with hay to lie down on, thick blankets to shield herself from the cold, a number of water skins and dried military rations for sustenance, and a small bucket for her leavings. This wasn't out of kindness or pity but necessity. He couldn't put her to work if she ended up starving or freezing to death during the trip, after all. And if she was the kind of person who would give up on life and let herself die, then that would be that.

Once the prisoners were securely strapped in place and Edward had personally inspected their restraints, he left the cargo container and locked its doors. About an hour later, Fizzy and Boxxy heard the griffins' eagle-like cries. Their temporary dwelling then started shaking violently and Fizzy felt an invisible force press down on her body as the griffin rapidly ascended into the air. This lasted for about twenty minutes until the creature climbed to cruising altitude, at which point the container levelled out.

What followed was a surprisingly smooth flight, with just the wind howling outside and the odd pocket of turbulence to remind its passengers they were actually in motion. Fizzy spent her time staring idly at the box in the corner. There wasn't any particular reason for that, though. There was simply nothing else around to distract her from her depressing thoughts. Plus, the container would shake occasionally and cause the box to sway into the electrified cage and get zapped, to which it would react with a yelp and a growl. This was oddly entertaining to watch.

The hours rolled by. Morning turned to noon, then to dusk, then to night. The beams of clear sunlight that poked through the holes near the ceiling and bathed the interior in a soft yellow light gradually disappeared. They were eventually replaced by moonlight, though it was so weak that it failed to light up anything at all.

The gnome could not sleep though. The sound the wind made as it rushed into those holes and the occasional shaking of their container made such

things pointless. The luxury carriage on the other griffin was probably stabilized to the point where its occupants would feel like they were on solid ground the whole way through. And it would be heated by magic, whereas she only had a bunch of loose blankets that smelled funny. While she probably wouldn't freeze to death, it didn't mean she wasn't cold. The chilly rations and water she'd been given didn't help much either.

As for the Mimic, it did what simple-minded and less complicated creatures do. It sat perfectly still, waiting for the right moment to come. It had taken a lot of patience, a good amount of pain, and having to give up two of its Jobs to get to this point, but that chance had finally come. And the opportunistic chest would seize it without fail.

Because that was what Boxxy T. Morningwood did best.

Part Five

When a prisoner escaped custody under their own power, it could almost always be blamed on a single act of negligence. Edward Allen knew this better than most people, having been incarcerated in and escaped from prisons many times throughout his troubled youth and long career in subterfuge. Which was why he made sure to keep a very watchful eye on the mimic that held the answers to the Calamity in its box-addled mind. It was denied freedom at all times and was given absolutely nothing, not even food or water. Its pathetic attempt at restraining Zone served as a prime example of a situation that could've gone awry if it wasn't for that woman's superb strength.

Containing monsters was a special case, however. On one hand, being slaves to their basic instincts meant they were not as unpredictable as they would appear. They all had certain behavioural patterns and their abilities were confined to a specific theme or concept. Unfortunately, mimics were not usually considered a major threat, since they didn't appear outside of dungeons. So information regarding them was minimal. It was known they had limited shapeshifting capabilities and favoured tactics that relied on stealth or ambushes, but that was about it.

Yet even if Edward wasn't completely certain what specific Skills and abilities his prisoner had at its disposal, they would undoubtedly have a

certain weakness: their fuel source. Much like the rest of the world, any supernatural tricks and magical gimmicks on Boxxy's part would require MP to activate. Meaning that once the mana-draining restraints were in place and had robbed the animate chest of its magical reserves, all that was left was to make sure its physical restraints were not lacking. Even on the odd chance it somehow escaped those bindings, it would be unable to lay a single splinter on the electrified cage it was in.

In short, the experienced spy had done everything in his power after capturing Boxxy to make sure it would not escape. However, the singular act of negligence – the one thing he had overlooked – that would provide the key to Boxxy's escape had occurred just before the monster was taken into custody. In the gap between getting kicked through a building and being knocked out with that weird potion, the Mimic had managed to withdraw a single MP recovery potion from its Storage. It had originally intended to drink it, heal up, and run away with all due haste, but it couldn't do any of that before it had been caught.

Which allowed that last crystal vial to remain in its maw, where it had been rolling around under its tongue this entire time. It had multiple urges to pop the thing and make a break for it, but Edward's constant hovering kept it from trying anything. Well, apart from the time it tried and failed to take that black-haired woman hostage. Thankfully it had realised that wasn't going to work before it blew its only chance.

With that moment gone, the Mimic persevered and waited for a better opportunity, and now the time to act had finally come. It was in the dead of night, in transit through the air, and with nobody around to stop it. If that detestable human was able to catch it even under such circumstances, then its chances of running away with its life were truly zero.

Boxxy began its escape attempt by growing a short, thick tentacle from its faux-wood frame. It pointed the appendage at the small box that was electrifying its prison, then crunched down on the mana potion in its mouth, setting its plan into motion.

[You have used a Mana Potion. MP +200.]

Acid started forming inside its appendage while the Mimic accessed its Storage and took out the other mana potion, its last healing potion, and

those two shiny daggers it liked so much.

[Your magical power has been forcefully dispersed. MP -50.]

The metal restraints bolted onto its body started glowing with a faint red light right just as the corrosive liquid gushed forth and splattered against the control box. The deluge did not last longer than a second and a half, however. That small spurt was all the monster could muster before what little MP it had regained ran dry.

“Hm? Huh?”

Fizzy, who was currently preoccupied with trying to tear into an ice-cold piece of dried meat, heard splashing sounds coming from the corner of the cargo container. She turned her attention in her cellmate’s direction just in time to notice the fading glow of its restraints amidst the sea of blackness. She kept staring at that spot as if expecting something, though she failed to see anything else since the moonlight shining through the holes near the ceiling was much too weak.

KKKHRRT BBZZZZZT PTSUN

Or so she thought, until a certain control box let out a number of worrisome noises accompanied by a few errant sparks.

With the humming noise gone, Boxxy slowly stretched out a tentacle and tentatively touched the black bars of its cage, confirming they were no longer electrified. Although the acid did nothing to eat away the sturdy bars themselves, the Mimic had accomplished its immediate goal of shorting out the device. The monster may not have been the sharpest knife in the drawer, but it still knew enough about Artificer-made equipment to know it didn’t take much to make it go haywire.

That was all well and good, but that had been the easy bit. The next part of the Mimic’s escape plan would not be so easy, nor anywhere near as painless.

“HRRRMPPH!”

The monster let out a muffled scream of pain as two pure-white blades pierced its lid from the inside out. It kept forcing them upward from the inside, working the handles via a pair of tongue-tentacles to widen the wounds, shrieking all the while. Once those were big enough, it carefully

gripped the pointy ends with a pair of external appendages, pulling them out of its mouth cavity. It then forced the wounds closed with its shapeshifting and waited patiently for the pain to subside and its HP to recover.

As for Fizzy, she had no idea what was going on. Her gnomish eyes were unable to completely pierce the darkness and the only thing she'd heard for the last while had been agonizing yelps of pain. And then, whether it was because the griffin changed course or because the clouds had shifted, the moonlight was allowed to shine right on the Mimic's cage. It was then she saw it holding two glistening blades above its lid, only to thrust them down upon itself.

The creature let out more groans and muffled screams as the twin daggers dug into its flesh. The monster then slowly but carefully carved away at the meat around one of its magic-draining restraints. After about half a minute of self-harm, Boxxy finally managed to dislodge one of the bolts that was keeping the enchanted metal brace in place. It was then removed from its hole and discarded onto the ground with a metallic rattle.

"Hnn! Hnn! Hnn!"

The monster panted heavily as thick yellow blood oozed out of its open wound. Even if the cuts weren't very deep and caused very little damage to its HP, they still hurt immensely. It was also the only way to get those bolts out of its body. Even if it was a shapeshifter, it didn't have complete control over its flesh. Its imitation wood frame could not be made to 'spit out' the bolts, which was exactly what that man Edward was counting on. What he didn't anticipate, however, was that Boxxy had both the means and willingness to essentially operate on itself.

One down, fifteen to go!

After mentally psyching itself up a bit, the Mimic moved on to the next one. And then the next. And then the next after that. One after the other, the metal bolts keeping its mouth firmly sealed came loose as Fizzy looked on in a mix of horror, shock, and disgust. Not knowing what to do, she once again tried running away from reality by burying herself underneath her blankets. That did little to stop the harsh sounds of metal cutting into flesh, however, nor did it deafen Boxxy's pain-filled wails, which lasted for a solid hour.

[Your magical power is no longer being suppressed. Automatic MP recovery has returned to normal.]

Once free of its restraints, the Mimic landed roughly on the floor of its cage. But it wasn't quite done. Next was its age-old enemy: the metal grating that surrounded it on all sides. Thankfully, its captors had revealed the weakness of this once-formidable foe. So it took the opportunity to just sit quietly on the ground, revelling in the sensation of once more being able to open its maw. Its MP had largely recovered after several minutes, at which point it placed all of its belongings back into Storage. It then stretched out a tentacle, slipped it through the bars in the cage, used Metal Mimicry to recreate the cage's key from its memory, and unlocked it.

And then, with a vague sense of pride and accomplishment, the monster finally stepped out of its cage. It opened its mouth as wide as it would go, letting out a hearty, throaty laugh to celebrate its victory through sheer perseverance.

"Hashashashasha! HAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH!"

It was official. Freedom. Was. Tasty.

Hearing the oddly cheerful noises coming from her cellmate made the gnome peek out from under her covers. And what she saw was a spider-legged chest that had broken completely free from its restraints rapidly yet silently approaching her own cage. She stared at it blankly and silently like a deer would a meteorite falling straight towards it, as if standing completely still would somehow make the incomprehensibly scary thing go away. This lasted until the monster opened its jaws to reveal two rows of jagged, mismatched metal teeth, which were promptly used to mangle the roof of her cage.

"No … NO!" she yelled. "Stay away! Please!"

Boxxy ignored her screams as it chewed its way through her cell. The wrought iron bars groaned and creaked and cracked as they resisted, but were ultimately no match for the monster's Metal-Mimicry-reinforced jaws. The rods of Fizzy's cage were mercilessly torn and ripped out as the monster made a huge hole in the gnome-sized jail. It then reached inside the cage with a trio of tongue-tentacles, wrapping them around the gnome's feet, neck, and torso.

“Nooo! **Sob** Don’t hurt me! Please don’t eat me!”

And then, without paying any heed to her pleas for mercy, it unceremoniously put her in its mouth and closed its jaws around her.

Now that Fizzy had been dealt with, Boxxy moved to the next obstacle in its path: the metal double doors in the back of the container. Not that they proved to be much of a challenge. The Mimic simply sprayed the area around the locks with acid for about a minute until they gave way. The doors then swung open and dangled erratically as the midnight sky stretched out before the creature.

Boxxy stood and stared at the view ahead with its frontal eye. The sky was clear, without a single cloud, providing an unobstructed view of the heavens and its countless shiny stars. The griffin’s feather-tipped tail swung about slightly with the beast’s every motion and its golden-furred rump was visible directly underneath the exit. The large metal doors flapped wildly to the left and right, at least until the wind snapped them off their hinges. They fell backwards, dancing erratically in the air as they plummeted towards the ground far below.

This exquisite scenery had a profound impact on the relatively simple creature. It reminded it that it was actually in mid-air. A detail that seemed to have temporarily escaped Boxxy’s mind, what with all the self-mutilation and jailbreaking. Well, at least altitude wasn’t much of a problem for a shapeshifter. All the Mimic had to do was gather whatever loose biomass it had remaining and send it towards its rear. A few seconds later, two wide bat-like wings – yet another body part mimicked from its favourite Snack – grew out from its back. The creature took a bit of time to gather its courage and then made a running leap off the container and into the night, unfurling its borrowed demonic wings.

It then proceeded to magnificently fall like a rock.

Boxxy had made a slight miscalculation. It was currently carrying some extra mass. A female gnome’s worth, to be precise. As such, it took a little flailing about, but it managed to coax itself into a glide before things went awry. Full-blown flight was out of the question since the wingspan-to-weight ratio wasn’t in its favour, so controlling and adjusting its descent was all it could do. This wasn’t the monster’s first freefall; it had tried and

failed multiple times to copy Snack's flying skills. Who knew all those times it had flung itself off cliffs would pay off like this?

The monster chanced a glance upwards and confirmed that the two griffins continued on their way at ludicrous speeds. Its escape appeared to have gone unnoticed, at least for the time being. Which was definitely a good thing. It felt proud of itself for waiting until nightfall to pull this off, as that no doubt made it more difficult for someone in the lead cabin to notice the Mimic's descent. Granted, it didn't believe simple darkness would be enough to completely hide it from *those* people, but it was surely better than escaping in broad daylight. There was also the vague hope that some or all of them would be asleep. Whether that was indeed the case or not, one thing remained clear:

Boxxy T. Morningwood had succeeded in running away.

If all went well, its breakout would go unnoticed until the group reached their destination. With some extra luck, they would think the Mimic died on impact with the ground, though they'd probably organize a search for it anyway. However, they would have no idea exactly when and where this breakout occurred. There would be too much ground to cover, and the monster would not simply stand still and wait to be found.

Not that Boxxy could actually piece any of this together. If it was a few days ago, it might have had the mental capacity to come to such reassuring conclusions on its own. As of right now, however, it was far too preoccupied with not falling to its death to worry about the maybes and the what-ifs.

After what felt like an eternity, the Mimic's guided descent finally ended. It touched down somewhere in the Sawblade Mountains, in a sparsely forested area that had a steep slope to it. It latched onto a pine tree and withdrew its wings, scanning its surroundings from its high vantage point. Once it was convinced nobody was giving chase, it climbed down the old trunk. It was only when its arachnid limbs touched down on solid ground that it finally allowed itself to relax a little.

'A little' being the operative phrase. Boxxy had no idea where it was, what monsters lurked around or, most important of all, where it could find food. It had to be more careful than ever, as it was in a relatively weakened state.

It didn't have its familiars, its magic, or what little expertise at handling gadgets and grenades it had picked up. Losing those two Jobs had been a huge setback, to say the least.

At least it held the key to recovering one of them.

It opened its maw and spat out something small, pink-haired, and unconscious. It would appear the drool-covered Fizzy had fainted from terror at the prospect of being eaten. After all, she was surrounded by teeth and a fleshy tongue wrapped firmly around her to keep her from resisting. Boxxy had also very nearly swallowed her whole on reflex on a few occasions, but it managed to keep a firm grip on its appetite. All things considered, her passing out was probably for the best.

As for the reasons it saved her, it had two. The obvious one was that it wanted its Artificer Job back. The second one was that it needed someone around to teach it things. Now that Snack was gone and Carl was unreachable, it had nobody around to guide it through civilized society. Granted, it didn't quite trust this gnome, but it was the best source of information it could dig up on short notice. If it wasn't for her valuable input concerning those mana-draining shackles, it might not have managed to escape like it did.

Speaking of which, it would probably be best if it got rid of her bindings. It reached down with its trio of tongue-tentacles and started fiddling with the locks on the shackles. It wasn't able to create a key like it did for its cage, but that wasn't really necessary. The monster's mind still held some memories from Fizzy's Artificer lessons, and it could clearly grasp the tumblers through its magical perception. It didn't take long to pick the locks.

[Proficiency level increased. Lockpick is now Level 1. DEX +3. PER +1.]

The gnome's shackles slid off her hands and feet and fell to the ground with a small rattling noise, which caused her to stir.

"Uuugh …" she groaned. "Hnn? Waaaah!"

She suddenly sat up screaming, her eyes as wide open as they could go. In front of her was a dark, creepy pinewood forest. Above her was the clear night sky. She was sitting on a steep and oddly muddy slope. To her left was a wooden chest. To her right –

“AAAAAAAAHHH!”

Brought face to face with a man-eating monster with nothing between them, she had no choice but to scream and crawl away backwards. Every fibre of her being told her she was about to be eaten ... except for one: her logical mind and observant nature. The same things that arguably got her into this mess in the first place.

“Haah, haah, haah,” she panted, taking in her surroundings. “You … didn’t eat me? We’re outside? And my cuffs are – You *freed* me?”

A woman’s pale-skinned head appeared in front of her.

“Yes,” it said simply.

“Why? How? What?”

“Art fisher. Teach.”

“…”

Right. It wanted something from her. What other reason could it possibly have for letting her live?

“And … Will you eat me after I teach you?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Not tasty.”

“…”

“Also, good teacher. Smart. Liar and betrayer, but good teacher. Therefore – teach, and will not eat.”

Her life did not seem to be in immediate danger and would likely remain that way so long as she was useful to this animate box with teeth.

“Wh-what about after I’m done teaching you all I can? You’ll kill and eat me then, right?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Need you.”

“You … what? *You?* Need *me*?”

“Yes.”

“What for!”

“For stuff. And things.”

“And you’re willing to trust me? After all I did to you?”

“No trust. You liar and betrayer. But machines don’t lie. They’re tasty. Not like you.”

“…”

She stared dumbly at the pale head that bore a stupid, loopy smile. ‘Machines don’t lie.’ The wording was a bit different, but that phrase was originally the same one her father liked to say. ‘Machines had no sin.’ That was what he used to say.

“I must be out of my mind,” she mumbled as she hugged her knees.

Maybe it was that accidental line. Maybe it was the thought that this thing had somehow avenged her brother and father. Or maybe it was the fact that, like it or not, this creature in front of her was the only one in the world she could turn to right now. Whatever the cause, she just couldn’t help but chase away the insane thought that maybe, just *maybe*, partnering up with this thing might work out somehow.

“Alright. I’ll teach you.”

No matter how much she debated the matter though, what choice did she really have? She would either be useful or get eaten. That was her world right now, and she would rather try to avoid the latter.

“Good,” said Boxxy with an even wider smile.

Clap

Clap

Clap

A sharp, loud noise repeated itself slowly for a total of three times. It seemed to pour in from all sides at once.

“Well done! Good show!”

Clap

Clap

Clap

In the next instant, Fizzy and Boxxy both found themselves seated next to each other at a large square dining table instead of on the forest floor. The table had dozens of plates with all manner of things, although none of those seemed to be food. A tiny stone bridge, a human kidney, a small leather bag, a hammer, a guitar, a legless fox, and a small key-shaped lump of mud were a few of the random objects gathered. The scenery beyond the table was a huge white space that seemed to go on forever, completely different from the dark and dreary woods they were in just seconds ago.

And sitting opposite them was a moustached dandy-looking old man in a black suit and a top hat.

“Forgive the sudden intrusion,” he said with a youthful voice that did not match his apparent age. “But I simply *had* to congratulate you. That escape was a truly marvellous performance.”

“What?” blurted out Fizzy.

She blinked in surprise, only to realise the man sitting at the table was now a purple goat with a tiny rowboat for a head.

“WHAT?”

She blinked again, and the goat turned into a floating kettle. The next time, the entity became a lizardman with a Mohawk and dark glasses on his snout. She blinked once more only to see a green-skinned woman in an evening gown and no face.

She was speechless.

The thing in front of her took a different shape every time her eyelids covered her sight for a tiny instant. She looked at Boxxy as if asking for help, but the Mimic in question had already retreated inside its not-actually-wooden shell and was currently chesting with all its might.

“I think I’ve finally gone nuts,” Fizzy said uncertainly.

“Nah, you’re probably fine,” said the breakdancing gecko. “It’s just that you mortals have difficulty perceiving me. Even the other Gods have

difficulty maintaining eye contact sometimes."

"Mortals? Other Gods?"

"Oh, my apologies!" exclaimed the inside-out sock. "I know you two as the illustrious Mister – *is* it 'Mister?' Let's go with 'Mister.' Ahem! As the illustrious Mister Boxxy T. Morningwood and the lovely Miss Cornie Fizzlesprocket ... but neither of you have any idea who *I* am! In that case, allow me to introduce myself."

The bare-bones skeleton stood up and took off its wings as if they were a book.

"My name is Bob, the God of Chaos."

The inside-out elephant then sat back down on its nails and let a fish float onto his foot.

"And I have called you two here to make an offer you will most likely not refuse."

Part Six

"Wait, hold on a minute!" screamed Fizzy. "There's no such thing as a God of Probability!"

"Now that's just supercalifragilisticexpialidocious!" screamed Joseph.

" … Whu-what?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," apologized Mulder. "I thought we were playing my favourite game: 'Scream random things that make no sense!' Fair warning though – I'm the reigning world champ!"

"I was doing no such thing!"

"Yes you were. I assure you that the God of Chance is not only quite real but that he's also sitting right in front of you."

"Then prove it!" the gnome insisted.

"Try and say my name three times in a row."

"Tyrone, Jose, Amy. Now wh–"

She froze mid-sentence. The gnome was *sure* she was saying Delilah's name right, but it always came out differently. Even thinking back on it, she was certain she was referring to the same entity, despite that making no logical sense.

"Not convinced!" she insisted. "The only thing you've proven is that you can mess with me, but that doesn't mean you're some rogue deity! I won't be fooled by some stupid illusions! I mean, I've never even heard mention of a God of Uncertainty!"

The same oddity seemed to apply to his title, too. Just now, she unintentionally called him the 'Goddess of Luck,' not the 'God of Randomness' as he introduced himself just moments ago.

Daniel smiled back at her from his brick.

"Just because you haven't heard of me doesn't mean I don't exist. Just like syphilis. Or the brain-sucking aliens from Ulk'Narob. I assure you not only am I real, but I'm perfectly capable of wrecking your shit with barely even a thought if you don't watch your mouth. Like so."

Snap

Linda snapped her trees, causing the gnome's head and neck to disappear, leaving behind nothing but smooth skin between her shoulders. Her arms immediately went to grab her missing appendage but failed miserably. It was as if it had never been there to begin with. Her headless body then started squirming and flailing around, completely unable to deal with the situation.

Snap

Her head popped up from between her shoulders like it was a jack-in-the-box.

"Aaarh! Haah, haah, haah!" she panted.

"Are we clear, young Fizzlesprocket?"

"Haah, haah. Yes, crystal clear. Mister Goddess of Chance, sir."

"Much better. Now then, Boxxy. Ah, now that we're face-to-face, this is awkward. Talking to a chest like this is pretty weird."

The gnome nearly made a comment about how hypocritical that sounded coming from a basket with legs but held it back.

“Here, let’s try this!”

Snap

A finger-snap was heard. The chest next to Fizzy flickered out of existence and a small naked child appeared in its place. It had brown skin, snow-white hair, red eyes, and looked about six or seven years old. The face was oddly androgynous, making it hard to tell if the child was male or female, but it was undeniably cute. It was smiling a sweet, innocent smile and had a thoroughly vacant look in its eyes.

“How’s that?” asked Kerry.

The child blinked a few times and stared at its fingers, then its lower body. Fizzy followed its gaze and ended up staring at its crotch almost involuntarily. She almost turned her face away in shame but realised that would be a pointless gesture. After all, the child had nothing between its legs but smooth skin, which was to be expected of a genderless creature.

“Feels weird,” said Boxxy with a fittingly neutral voice.

“Well, it’s only temporary, so please bear with it.”

“Okay.”

“B-Boxxy?” stammered the gnome. “Is that you?”

“Yes,” answered the child matter-of-factly.

She turned around to stare at the God of Anarchy with accusatory eyes.

“Ah, this is simply what the Mimic would look like if it were human,” explained Estel. “This is merely an image I dredged up from its subconscious, so don’t look at me like that, okay? I swear I’m not into naked little kids or anything, alright! I’m a firm believer in the glory of large chests!”

Kishralbadaz the Inheritor stifled a giggle at her own bad pun. She then leaned forward, put her salamis on the table and looked right at the Mimic. Which was impressive considering she had three-and-a-half heads and snowballs for eyes.

“Anyway, now that that’s over with I can finally have a proper chat you.”

“You know me?” asked Boxxy.

“Oh yes. Better than you might think. This isn’t the first time we’ve spoken, you know.”

“It’s not?”

The Mimic was sure it would remember meeting something bizarre like Russel.

“Hmm, technically speaking, I was the only one doing the talking at the time, so calling it a conversation would be hard. I also said some hurtful things, but I hope you’ll forgive me. I get just a little bit *ABSOLUTELY LIVID* when some random box tries to steal my dungeon core for no good reason.”

“ … Oh.”

So the mysterious and slightly annoying entity behind that dungeon core had finally revealed itself.

“And sorry for trying to blow you up like that. It was uncalled for and totally my bad. Unexpected, as well. I was so certain you would just leave the core behind when you found out it was going to go, but it appears I miscalculated.”

“It’s okay. Got many tasty Levels.”

“Hahaha, that you did. I must say, you genuinely surprised me that day. Not everyone would be willing to blow up an entire city if the opportunity presented itself.”

“Blow up a city?” Fizzy butted in. “You’re telling me this thing really did cause that Calamity?”

“Uhm … Yes and no. It’s complicated.”

“And you don’t *mind*?”

“Why would I?”

“Don’t you care that so many people died!”

“Do you?”

“Of course I do!”

“Really? Then I suppose you mourned and prayed for every last one of those 8,235 souls?”

“Err … ”

“You only selfishly mourned your own father and brother, did you not? You’d probably put the incident completely out of your tiny mind if those two weren’t tangentially involved.”

“…”

Jack was right on the money. Even though Fizzy understood it was, objectively speaking, a horrible tragedy, she just couldn’t bring herself to truly care about some humans being killed off somewhere. They were, after all, not *her* people.

“Now, do you have any more inane questions?”

“ … Just one. Why does *this* thing get to meet an actual god face-to-signpost? What’s so special about it?”

“It’s consistently unpredictable, even before the big bada-boom. I actually went and reviewed the dungeon’s logs and found them to be quite entertaining. Here, let me give you some examples.”

The flagpole pulled out a small booklet and opened it to a bookmarked page.

“This thing survived its first two weeks in this world through a mixture of luck and ability. It took all chances that the flows of chaos presented it with and, for better or for worse, latched onto them with all its might without any hesitation. I respect that sort of thing, you know. A chance exists to be taken, after all.”

The three-eyed fork turned the page on the pamphlet it was holding in its bottles.

“It then absorbed the Warlock Job from a corpse. You know what the odds of it succeeding at that were? Four thousand to one! And it managed to pull it off on only the third try! Well, its current chance of succeeding at that same outcome is closer to about four hundred to one, but that’s beside the point.”

She turned the pigeon upside down.

“And that magnificent stroke of good fortune happened right after it broke out of the dungeon through what I can only describe as dumb luck and a total fluke. I can’t say that failed to impress me. Then it sort of did its own thing outside the dungeon for a bit, fought some adventurers, ate some people, yadda yadda yadda. Oh – here’s a good one: It gibbed a dwarf just as she was teleporting away with a Portal Key! Her friends’ reactions when they saw a pair of disembodied legs appear out of thin air was really something else, let me tell ya!”

Lawrence rolled up the parchment and put it away inside his igloo.

“So that’s roughly the time when I started keeping an eye on it, mostly through those two familiars. And here’s the really amazing part: I realised that I’d actually been sort of introduced to it before that Calamity stuff even happened! This thing right here somehow managed to forward me its Status when making a demonic contract! Do you know how many times that has happened!”

“I don’t –”

“Never! It has never, ever happened! I have absolutely no idea how the fuck it actually did that, either!”

“I did?” Boxxy said with a stupid look on its face.

“Uh, *yeah*?” said Nick. “Oh right – you wouldn’t know, but I’m actually Katorolomaongott’s boss.”

“Who?”

“Uhm… I believe he introduces himself as Carl to mortals.”

“You know Carl?”

“Well, I don’t really ‘know’ the guy, he just works for me. All demons do, technically speaking. Even the Demon King, though he’s more widely known as Overlord of the Infinite Abyss.”

“Overlord? Like Punchy?”

“More or less. Him too, by the way. You know, I was the one who created them. Demons, I mean. Completely by accident, too. It started as a little experiment that went really out of control, you see. And the result was a

selfish, uncooperative bunch that don't give a flying fuck about mortals. Those kids – I'm so proud of them! Ah, forgive me. I don't often get to brag so I got a little sidetracked."

Frank reigned in his enthusiasm and proceeded with the meat of the matter.

"Point is, I wasn't actually planning on making an appearance at all. Sort of ruins the fun if I do that. But that's when two particular demons started raising a huge fuss over their 'unauthorized and unwarranted contract termination' or what have you. I mean, the fact your random acts of violence somehow got a fiend and a succubus to agree on something is just mind boggling! So, all things considered, I decided I would help you out. And that's why I brought you here."

"Then you're going to make me a Warlock again?" Boxxy's face looked like it was about to explode from excitement.

"No."

And then sank into the depths of despair.

"I'm going to give you a *chance*. That's the best I can do, and I'm only doing it because I like you. Also, it's partly because that bitch Teresa cheated, and I don't like that. Therefore, I'm going to even the odds a little, as it were. So, without further ado –"

Snap

A window popped up into the Mimic's mind.

Defeat the lich
Description: There's an undead lich hiding in these mountains. It has been raising its own personal army of the undead in secret. Find it, defeat it, and claim victory for chaos.
Difficulty: ������������
Time Limit: Until the God of Uncertainty gets bored
Reward: Your Warlock and Artificer Jobs will be fully restored. You will become the chosen Hero of the God of Chaos.
Progress: 0/1

"No rush," Chris said reassuringly. "It's a big undertaking, so do consider it carefully."

Boxxy understandably had a few questions about this proposition. The reward was exactly what it wanted right now, but that difficulty rating of six turtles was more than a little odd. However, it decided it was probably better to address a more pressing concern first. “What’s a lich?”

“Oh right, you have no idea. Hmm. Basically, a super-powerful undead being that commands hordes of the dead. They also love throwing magical attacks at people’s faces.”

“Like Warlocks with skeletons?”

“Well … you’re not exactly right, but not exactly wrong, either.”

So it was a Spell-slinging opponent that had many familiars. A dangerous thing to have as an enemy to be sure. Still, the Mimic would probably end up accepting the Quest anyway. The reward was way too tasty to ignore. Speaking of the rewards, that second bit raised quite a few questions as well.

“Do I have to be a Hero?” it asked.

“I’m afraid so. I’m not doing this out of the kindness of my spleen. I actually expect to get something in return from you.”

“Oh.”

“Do you not like the idea?”

“No.”

“Well, why not?”

“Being hero – not tasty.”

“Tasty? Oh, right, I see. Hmm, that’s too bad. And here I had estimated there would be an 84.255% chance of you finding it tasty. I admit your ability to beat the odds was the whole point of this, but this just seems personal. Is being a Hero really all that, uh, untasty?”

“Yes.”

“How come?”

“Heroes share their tasties and shinies with others. Heroes die fighting scary things instead of running. Heroes are idiots. I want to be less idiot, not more.”

“Oh! No, no, you’re thinking of the wrong kind of ‘hero,’ Boxxy. I’m not referring to the selfless people who sacrifice themselves for the good of others.”

“You’re not?”

“I’ll explain. Being the Hero of a God basically means you’ll become their chief representative in the mortal plane – the living embodiment of the virtues they stand for. In my case its random acts of whatever. You do get a few unique divine powers to play around with too, so it’s not like the title doesn’t have its benefits.”

The Mimic had to agree, that certainly sounded much tastier than what it was imagining initially. It sounded like Morrigan here would be its boss, but it could probably live with that arrangement. Just so long as it was in the form of Quests or tasks, rather than being directly controlled like when it was a simple dungeon monster. Of course, that was only if it actually managed to kill that lich-thing.

“What if I fail Quest? Or give up?” Boxxy would certainly try to do it, but it wanted to know if backing out to preserve its own life was an option.

“Then you’ll just have to get your Jobs and Levels back the old-fashioned way.”

So there were no apparent downsides to abandoning this endeavour entirely? Come to think of it, the Quest didn’t ask for a deposit like those Mercenary Guild assignments, so that made sense. Having confirmed that it had the option of simply giving up was the last thing the Mimic needed before making up its mind.

“Okay. I accept.”

[Boxxy T. Morningwood has undertaken a Quest: Defeat the lich.]

Fizzy raised her arm like a schoolgirl requesting permission to speak. It appeared she had finally realised that rudely interrupting an actual God was probably not a smart idea. Especially not one whose entire domain hinged on unpredictability and randomness.

“Yes, what it is, Fizzlesprocket?”

“Earlier you said the Goddess of Truth and Justice cheated. I find that hard to believe.”

“Yeah, she cheated! She got super butthurt her chosen Hero got one-shot by a box and revived him! She’s not supposed to do that! If not for her involvement, Boxxy over here wouldn’t be in this mess! Well – it would be in *a* mess, just not this one. The trouble this thing gets up to really is something else.”

Nick turned his gills to face Boxxy once again.

“By the way, great work with that priestess from about a week ago. Oh man, you should’ve seen that stuck-up bitch’s face when I showed her the image of her faithful servant taking it up the ass like a champ! It got even uglier when I told her the one that killed her also stole a Holy Pearl and pinned the blame for the crime on that dead nun! That really rustled Her jimmies, let me tell ya! She got so mad that she threw a gigantic hissy fit – it was amazing!”

The sister Lyo incident that Erosa was up in arms about had apparently been staged by a monster. And yet that tidbit was somehow the least surprising thing Fizzy had heard tonight.

“Haah, I will treasure that memory for a long while. Anyway, being the sore loser that she is, she went and sent a divine revelation to her oracle saying something along the likes of ‘The perpetrator is in Erosa.’ That’s why that Edward guy was there a few days ago.”

“…”

The dumb smile Boxxy sported instantly turned into a huge frown. The way it understood things, the whole reason it was in this position was because these deities were having some sort of internal dispute that it had nothing to do with.

Noticing the scornful glare, the God of Probability tried to make an excuse. “Hey, you were bound to get found out eventually, so don’t put the blame on me, alright?”

But it just kept silently staring daggers at him.

“Okay! Okay, I admit it was almost entirely my fault. I’m here taking responsibility for my rash actions though, aren’t I?”

“But did not help with escape?” it questioned.

“How do you know I didn’t?” countered the deity. “My manipulations are so subtle that nobody can spot them before it’s too late. Someone overlooking to check the inside of your mouth, or the watertight seal on your cage’s control box eroding away. Perhaps it may not have been as obvious as sending the four Overlords to bust you out, but I could’ve easily been responsible for facilitating your escape.”

“So did you help or not?” repeated Boxxy, clearly not buying into Clarence’s cryptic bullshit.

“Alright fine. I could’ve, but I didn’t. Interfering with the lives of mortals in such a direct manner is cheating, and I don’t wanna stoop to Teresa’s level. That would only spark a godly miracle-measuring contest that I want no part of. Besides, watching you struggle to break free all on your lonesome was far, far more fun than just letting you out.”

The Mimic thought on those words. It considered their implications and came to a singular conclusion which it decided to share with this mysterious entity.

“I don’t like you.”

“Hahahaha! Well said, Boxxy, well said! That sort of childish attitude of yours is exactly the reason I like you! One never truly knows what’s going through a child’s head, you know? Tell you what, since I was slightly to blame for that whole incident, I’m going to make things a bit easier on you.”

Jacob turned his attention back to the gnome. “You there, Fizzlesprocket. Since you’re just an extra, how about you make yourself useful and help my new friend here with its Quest?”

“What – with fighting some mighty undead? Nonononono! I have the combat ability of a flea! I have no place on the battlefield! Or out of town! Or out of my own house, for that matter!”

“I know, but I have a fix for that. I’ll just make you a Paladin! Nobody can kick bony butt quite like a Paladin can! You even get to champion my name! That sounds fun, doesn’t it?”

The God of Probability lifted an arm and went to snap its feathers –

“No, it doesn’t!”

– but was stopped by Fizzy’s outburst.

“I can’t accept such a thing!” she continued. “Why do I have to help this man-eating monster with anything! Besides, you’re way too shady! If I have to live with your voice in my head, I’d probably go insane within the week!”

Rupert stared at her intently with his meatball-tipped toes.

“ … Roll a D20.”

“Huh?”

A fist-sized object fell onto the table, bounced a few times and rolled towards her before stopping within arm’s reach. It was a wooden shape with twenty equal faces and numbers etched on each side.

“Roll that die. If you get fifteen or higher, you win.”

The gnome swallowed audibly. This was sudden, but it sort of made sense considering Craig’s occupation. She picked up the so-called D20 and gave it a roll across the table with her short arms.

Kotorororororororrr

And it landed on a seventeen.

“Oh, lucky you!” exclaimed Beatrice. “Congratulations! You win!”

Snap

A bright light abruptly enveloped Fizzy, only to disappear just as rapidly.

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 1 Paladin! STR +2. END +2. INT +2.]

[The Faith (FTH) Attribute has been created through a special action. FTH +1.]

[The Luck (LCK) Attribute has been created through a special action. LCK +1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Champion of Chaos is now Level 1. FTH +2. LCK +2.]

“What the shit!” she protested. “I won the roll, didn’t I?”

“Yes, you did.”

“Then how come you forced this on me anyway!”

“Because I had already decided on it.”

“Then what was that roll about!”

“To see whether I would shatter your fragile mind for daring to question my authority.”

“ … Oh.”

“Good thing you won,” commented Boxxy.

“Yeah … Why me, though?”

“That’s the question everyone asks when things aren’t going their way,” said Lucy. “Why me? Why did this happen? What did I do to deserve this? The answer to all of those is really simple.”

A single silver coin fell from above and bounced on the wooden table with a small ding, landing heads-up in front of Fizzy. She only had to look at it for a moment before comprehending its meaning.

“ … There is no reason. Just the luck of the draw.” The words floated out of her mouth almost all on their own.

“Very good! See, you have a handle on this Champion of Chaos thing already!”

Ding ding ding ding

The sound of a small bell ringing suddenly filled the area.

“And it would appear that is all we have time for. I’ll be sending you two back to the physical realm now. Just watch that first step.”

He raised his left thorax and prepared to snap his leaves for the final time.

“It’s a doozy!”

Snap

Epilogue

Boxxy and Fizzy suddenly found themselves high in the sky – higher than even the griffins flew – and were plummeting downward. The sheer speed at which they were falling was well beyond any rhyme or reason, causing them to reach the ground within seconds, whereupon they crash-landed into a couple of unconscious bodies.

“HISSSS!”

“GYAAA!”

They both woke up screaming, as if meeting with the God of Chance had been nothing more than a nightmare. However, their current conditions left very little doubt in their minds that the meeting had been quite real.

“Okhsy? Haht? Hasha! Haaaaaaaaah! His ishn’t hakkehinh!”

The Mimic let out a series of confused noises while the gnome stared at it with a stupid expression. She then looked at her hands, her legs, then back to the monster, then back to her own body. Satisfied with her inspection, she then raised her face and both arms to the sky.

“Willie!” she shouted. “Wrong body! Not mine!”

“Oh, shit!” came a disembodied voice. “I fucked that up! Wow! Here, let me fix it!”

Snap

Boxxy’s vision blurred and the world seemed to spin around wildly for a moment as it was instantly put back in its own body. Fizzy must have gone through pretty much the same, seeing as how she collapsed on all fours and started pounding the ground with her tiny fist.

“I almost! Became! A fucking! Box!” She then raised that fist towards the heavens. “You incompetent divine bastard! I’ll get you back for this!”

“Hey now,” came the voice once more. “I’ll overlook that this one time since I was at fault, but take it easy with the blaspheme, alright? It’s not healthy.”

“Fine, whatever!” Fizzy said. “Then as your Champion can I just say I’d appreciate it if you took things more seriously!”

“This God thing isn’t as easy as it looks you know! I’d like to see you try and pull off a double Reverse Astral Projection without messing *something* up. Anyway, I seriously have to go now. You guys take care.”

Silence dominated the forest again. The two mortals quietly stared at each other, now fully aware they were little more than playthings for the God of Inconsistency.

“So … what happens now?” asked Fizzy.

“Time to teach.”

“Huh? Oh, right. You still want me to give you the Artificer Job.”

“No.”

The Mimic had every intention of fulfilling that Quest and earning back what was rightfully its own. It decided to do something that would be a lot more useful than waste time and resources on pointlessly raising the Artificer Job.

“ … Then what?”

“You have new Job?”

“Yeah. I’m a Level 1 Paladin now, apparently. I can’t teach you that one, though.”

The Mentor Skill required her to have Level 25 in a Job before she could pass it on to others.

“No, mistaken. I teach you.”

“Oh please! What could *you* possibly teach *me*?”

“How to fight like monster.”

The gnome swallowed audibly. This wasn’t going to bode well for her. Especially since she’d just heard Bruce’s amused cackling somewhere in the back of her head.

Afterword

Well, so ends another instalment of this weird and disturbing series. Maybe it was a bad idea to wait until the second book to introduce any sort of overarching plot, but hey, the main character is only a few months old. Naturally it won't have grand motivations like trying to become the pirate king or aiming to achieve godhood or whatever. Boxxy is a spiteful little bastard though, so you can rest assured it will definitely aim for Edward's head if given the chance.

I feel quite proud of how things turned out in this volume, to be honest. Especially the God of Luck. So many times when you hear about a God/Goddess of Chaos in fiction they're represented as someone who brings naught but destruction, death, and carnage. That's not what Terry's about. Well, not all of it, anyway. The Goddess of Inconsistency is all about change, which doesn't always have to be brought about by bloodshed. It's just that violence often accompanies any large shifts in a culture or society in this fictional world of mine.

The other deities are also not as stereotypical as one might imagine. For example, the God of War does not wish to plunge the world into armed conflict, he just wishes for the mortals to conduct themselves honourably and respectively when the time comes. Likewise, the God of Death is there to manage the souls of the deceased and make sure their remains are not befouled or besmirched. He's also quite interested in commerce – because nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.

Fizzy was a curious little creature. Originally I intended her to be just a throwaway character, another minor footnote in Boxxy's murderous path towards … wherever it was going. But as I wrote about her, the more attached I became, and she ended up becoming something I never intended her to be. Not that I'm complaining though. I dare say she's my personal favourite character, especially after the metamorphosis she will go through in the next volume.

I should also warn you that although I will try to keep the kinky stuff to a minimum (it's one of the biggest complaints I hear about this series), it will never truly disappear. While it may seem like those elements interfere with the story, this would be a very different tale without them. I also think it

adds a layer of irony that all this lewd stuff happens around a monster that lacks any sort of biological or psychological drive to get naughty with anything, despite all its potential for depravity.

In closing I would like to invite you to check out the RPG GameLit Society on Facebook. It's a great place to discuss the budding genre and get the scoop on the latest releases.

Well, I suppose that's it for me for the moment.

Toodles!

Nathalie

Confessions of a Fashion Model

The Dark Side of the Fashion Industry

Monarch Mind Control, Slavery and Sexual Abuse

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Monarch Mind Control, Slavery and Sexual Abuse

Nathalie Augustina
WITH THE COLLABORATION OF ROBIN DE RUITER

Nathalie

Confessions of a Fashion Model

The Dark Side of the Fashion Industry

Monarch Mind Control, Slavery and Sexual Abuse

Mayra Publications

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Introduction by Robin de Ruiter

This book tells the story of Nathalie, a fashion model who has been celebrated for her striking physical beauty. She did shootings for many prestigious magazines and photographers, and she has been booked for important fashion and jewelry shows to the huge fashion catalogs worldwide.

Nathalie did shows for Dior, Cartier, Issey Miyake, Chanel, Kenzo, Comme des Garçon and many other famous designers. She was also booked by "Diners Club" for luxury fashion catalogs which are exclusively made and only available for high class society.

Many think that fashion models lead a glamorous life. In this book you will learn that *not everything* is about " *glamour"* and "fame". In the Fashion industry there are countless dangers.

After Nathalie became the darling of high ranking politicians, moguls, powerful business executives, famous actors and singers, and members of some of the richest families of this world and royalties, she was drugged for elite sex parties and raped by many of them.

Most modeling agencies are nothing less than whorehouses, and bookers are their pimps. Models are beaten, get their faces cut up or will be killed if they dare to tell the truth. Many of them died falling from a balcony or in other mysterious ways. Other models disappeared before they got the chance to reveal what is going on behind the scenes. They have never been found.

It is very dangerous for young girls and boys to become part of the fashion world. There is no one who protects them. After reading this book, you will understand that the model agencies cannot be trusted. They are the last to protect the young models.

Nathalie was not just a fashion model. Special mind control programs play an important role in the world of fashion. Like many models, Nathalie has undergone "Monarch mind control" programming. This program is able to divide the human psyche into multiple personalities (MPD), all within

the same individual. Each personality is able to take over one's consciousness at any given moment.

One of the multiple personalities created within Nathalie was a programmed high class Beta sex slave, exclusively for the super rich. The primary function of Beta models is to provide perverted sex and "Sadism and Masochism".

In this book you will not only gain insights into the world of the Fashion industry, it is also an outstanding piece of information about "Monarch Total Mind Control" programming.

Nathalie was an important multifunctional programmed mind controlled Monarch slave. For that reason, and to be able to understand the narrative written by Nathalie, it is necessary to first carry out a protracted analysis about mind control and the people behind the "Monarch Total Mind Control" programming.

Monarch Total Mind Control

The Monarch programming create people (computerized human robots) who go unnoticed in public life. They are considered "standard people", but they can at any time be activated to carry out special assignments.

Most people have no knowledge about the Monarch program. Others believe this only happens in movies like "Conspiracy Theory" (a film with Mel Gibson) or in the series of films adapted from the Jason Bourne novels. Nonetheless, films that are made on topics relating to mind control are most of the time based on reality.

As much as it may sound like fiction, Monarch mind control which involves important corporations and people of influence is very real and does exist!

Many reports from victims and whistleblowers of the Monarch program can be found on the internet. However, they can't be verified. What's more, most "Internet sources" are not confident.

Unfortunately there are no correct variations of truth about the true nature of the Monarch program. There is only one truth which has been purposely covered up and re-branded to ensure that those who dare to ask questions or want to know more about it, are unsuspectingly led into a dangerous cocktail of truth mixed with error.

In a world of chaos and misinformation how can we truly know that what we hear about the Monarch mind control programming is real? In a world where we are consciously trying to ensure we don't get hoodwinked or deceived by “half truths“, how can we really know for sure that there exist a secret mind control agenda in a way that simply seems too astonishing to believe?

The most powerful weapon any human can possess comes in the form of knowledge. In this case, it is the correct and true knowledge of Monarch programming. Nathalie´s book is different from other books on the topic. It separates light from darkness. After reading this book you will be able to understand and be aware of Monarch mind control.

The detailed information in this introduction was taken from my book *The 13 Satanic Bloodlines - Paving the Road to Hell.* Monarch-expert Fritz Springmeier, who has co-authored my book, brought years of experience in dealing with mind control programming and Monarch victims. He is one of the first and top researchers on Monarch mind control programming; an authority on this subject. His research involved special techniques and a critical thinking.

Invisible superiors

In almost every act of our daily lives, whether in the sphere of politics or business, in our social conduct or our ethical thinking, we are dominated by a relatively small number of persons; mem-bers of the most exclusive family dynasties that live dispersed over the world. The true aim of these influential families is complete control of Planet Earth. Their target is to force a “One Universal Slave State” (New World Order) on the whole of mankind. A “World Dictatorship” in which a computer-controlled social order rules and in which the individual will be controlled at all times. Those who are obedient and subservient to the One World Government will be rewarded with the means to live. Those who are rebellious will simple be eliminated.

With the help of important networks, money and violence, these families have infiltrated all structures of power. On all-important posts within governments, religious organizations, scientific– and educational institutions, finance, mass media, the music– and Fashion industry, Hollywood and many other branches of society, they have their men in

position. From this starting point, they are able to influence civilian life. They are controlling us, molding our minds and forming our tastes and our ideas.

Humanity is made soft and deliberately manipulated in such a way through conflict, hate, envy, hardship, hunger and distress that in the end there will be no other way than to surrender to the power of our “invisible superiors”. The more confusion, class struggle, discrimination, war and political tension that exists in the world, the faster the day will come that the whole of mankind will accept a World Government that will rule with an iron fist.

Most of the population is living in ignorance. They do not have any idea as to what is happening in today's world. They don’t notice it, because they are busy making just enough money to get by, stuck in traffic, football matches, watching television and their cell phones. Their remote control makes them feel like gods.

Like fools, we entrust all our private information to the system and totally depend on it for our monetary and other needs. There’s an “ignorance”; from “social cohesion” to so-called “independence” and “social fragmentation”. The System takes care of everything and is responsible for everything. We totally depend on the System and no longer on each other.

Like sheep most of us simply do what they are told and accept what they see and electronic device for everything. We go from “active” to “passive”; from “independent” to “fully depen-dent”; from “awareness” to hear.

Stop moaning?

We simply can’t be bothered to use our brains and maintain our skills. Back to the television with a can of beer. Get up early in the morning, stuck in traffic, work, stuck in traffic again; television, beer and back to sleep; day in and day out. And do not forget the supermarket on Saturday.

How are the plans that are designed to lead us into a New World Order being kept secret?

Under normal circumstances the hidden plans would leak sooner or later. Covert operations tend to be infiltrated with dissatisfied individuals or whistle-blowers. It is easy to understand that one weak link could be fatal to the “invisible elite”. So how do they keep their plans being kept secret?

The true leaders of this world are masters in the art of secrecy. One of their best kept secrets and most important triumphs up to now is the

successful containment of the ultra-secret “Monarch Total Mind Control” program. This program is the foundation of the plot to force all of humankind into a New World Order.

The Monarch mind control (control of someone’s consciousness) of a select few in society is a guarantee for absolute secrecy. It gives the “invisible elite” the power to carry out any evil deed totally undetected. [1]

Josef Mengele

Joseph Mengele, one of the ruthless Nazi criminals of the twentieth century, has played a crucial role in the development of the Monarch mind control program. He was not only the designer of this program; he also introduced it to the world of science.

Mengele’s life is one surrounded by secrets, contradictions and smoke screens. This is because he was part of the occult hierarchy that is in pursuit of total world control.

Mengele was born in the Günzberg in 1911. He studied in Munich, Bonn, Frankfurt and Vienna. His goal was a career as researcher in the field of genetics. After medical school, he became an assistant to Baron Otmar von Verschuer, a Dutch biologist and geneticist, who was a Professor of Human Genetics at Frankfurt University.

In 1942, Baron Verschuer sent Mengele to the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute of Anthropology, Human Heredity, and Eugenics in Berlin. Here, under the supervision of Baron Verschuer, Mengele conducted countless experiments in the sphere of mind control on hundreds of innocent victims.

From the beginning the work and research of Josef Mengele at the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute was funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. This foundation was actively involved with the “final check experiments” of this Institute.

In 1943, Mengele was sent to the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp. His duty was to develop part of a technology that could turn people into “human machines”.

In January 1945, when it became apparent that Adolf Hitler was going to lose the war, Mengele disappeared from Auschwitz. He was secretly flown to the United States, where his research and experiments of mind control were secretly continued. [2]

In the United States, using the knowledge he had already gathered while experimenting on thousands of children in Auschwitz, Mengele developed his knowledge about programming the human mind.

Part of the Monarch Total Mind Control program was established in the beginning of the Fifties. The main developers were Josef Mengele and the well-known electroshock specialist Ewen Cameron.

The Monarch program is able to divide the human psyche into multiple personalities (MPD), all within the same individual. [3]

The success of Monarch programming is mainly owed to the simple fact that within any person, new personalities who are able to take over one's consciousness at any given moment can be created.

The brain of a Monarch slave is programmed step by step, just like a computer. The method is the same as if a computer program is being implanted into the brain of the Monarch slave. Once programmed, the Monarch program controls the behavior of the individual; giving him direction.

New created personalities within an individual are called "alters". Programmed alters know nothing of the existence of the other personalities. They also are not aware of what's going on in the outside world.

The brain regards each alter as a different and separate individual that possesses its own identity. Each "alter" is given its own script by the programmers. All created (usually multiple) personalities are focused on one or more tasks. Required alters, when needed, are capable of fully taking control of the behavior of the individual.

Each Monarch slave is subjected to a "slave controller" (slave handler). To be able to carry out any task, assignment or mission, required personalities can be called forth by their slave handler with a specific hypnotic or other kind of code, that tie back in to the computer that is built within the mind of the individual. [4]

As soon as the slave handler gives a certain code, the required alter is activated and takes full control of the individual. After the job is done, the alter is put to sleep. The "every day" front alter of the programmed individual, that is habitually in charge, becomes instantly active again.

There are standard and unique codes. To trigger an alter without the conscious awareness of the Monarch slave, all a slave handler has to do is

use a certain word, a color or symbols that are programmed into the subject's psyche by the programmer. Among others, access can be accomplished by a letter or by snapping the fingers (hypnosis) and calling out the name of a required alter. [5]

For a certain number of important slaves, access is accomplished by a message through telephone. These access phone calls have high-speed codes transmitted that trigger the slave subliminally without their conscious awareness. Intelligence codes often come from the Bible. The deeper codes are occult words, often in the old Arabic language, which is an important language in the upper occult world.

The entire alter system of a Monarch slave has their sleep patterns controlled. Some alters are programmed to sleep and others to stay awake 24 hours a day internally. Because we humans need to sleep, special alters are hypnotically commanded to only sleep three hours. This insures that the mind stays in an easy-to-program and easy-to-hypnotize state.

Not all alters are programmed to carry out assignments or special missions. Some alters are programmed to coordinate the personalities of all the other alters. [6] Internal programming alters have the power to change specific codes if they need to protect the programming.

The best manager is somebody who doesn't want to spend a lot of time giving instructions to his employees. This also applies to a slave handler. If a slave handler has to be constantly making sure the slave is doing his work, the handler will become a slave to the slave. For that reason, within the mind of all Monarch slaves self-directing and self-correcting alter personalities are created who think they are the handler or programmer themselves. [7]

Created traumatic experiences through torture

To create multiple personalities (MPD) within a person, specialized scientists appointed by the "elite" utilize among others penetrating and excessive mind control methods; a combination of psychology neuroscience and elements of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA). [8]

The Monarch program is a sophisticated group package incorporating all of the known techniques of mind control. All known methods have been carefully interwoven. [9]

Monarch scientists also make use of deliberately created traumatic experiences for those being programmed. The complete programming of every Monarch slave is executed based on a trauma.

The basic principle of the Monarch program is that the brain protects itself from extreme trauma by consciously creating multiple personalities within one person. [10]

Josef Mengele's research in Auschwitz was primarily focused on the amount of pain and number of traumatic experiences a person can undergo without dying from it.

Maybe now you can understand why Mengele operated in Auschwitz without using sedation. Why he removed organs from living, conscious victims. He also sewed children together. All without anesthesia!

The experiments were statistically summarized, to immediately see how much torture a child can take and, ultimately, be enslaved based on a trauma. The results of Mengele's research have been kept absolutely secret to this day. No laboratory note or manuscript relating to Mengele's work has ever been found.

Creating new personalities

Mind control starts with dissociation; splitting or separation from the mind. An alter always appears based on terrible occurrences that cannot be dealt with, and are thus repressed .

When heavily traumatized, the human mind builds a virtual wall around this painful memory. This wall functions as a sort of shield for the individual. The actual personality of this person doesn't know what goes on in his subconscious. The primary personality of this person is being pushed aside for his own protection. At that moment a new personality can be created within the individual.

The wall built around a traumatic event, among others ensures that the Monarch slaves can live an ordinary life in order not to be recognized as such by people around them.

The shield also protects the identity of the programmers and the slave handlers. A world of secret alters, loyal and devoted to the programmer, can also be built into the system and does not appear on the regular charts.

It is important to know, that some programmers, to protect themselves from getting killed if one day they become redundant, in secret, place back doors into the mind of selected “imperative” slaves, that only they know about.

There is a variant of the Monarch programming aimed at programming adults, yet mind control based on trauma and aimed at programmed segregated personalities (MPD) is generally applied to children under the age of six. [11]

According to several former Monarch slaves, it is customary that the Monarch program is applied to babies of just a few months old to children of age six. This is done because children under the age of six can be easily influenced. When a child is raised in a certain way, it will be hard to later change or restructure that personality. [1 2]

The programmer receives his instructions from high quarters. Then he decides which ghastly traumatic event will be applied. A method often used is premature birth. This method is crucial because the child is traumatized in a natural way. For a pre-mature baby the lack of a comfortable maternal body will be experienced as a trauma. Such a start in life will make it easier for the programmers to mold the child. A premature birth will make a child combative. When a child develops a strong will and a fighter’s attitude to survive its premature birth, it will also be capable of living through the torture that comes with programming. Not all these children are premature, but since it’s the favorite method of the programmers, the number of forced early births is increasing. [13]

The mothers who are pregnant with the children that will be programmed are also subjected to traumatic experiences during their pregnancies. The intent is to traumatize the expecting mothers in such a way that their children are also influenced. Besides this, some babies are tortured with thin needles even as they are still in their mother’s belly. Through the abdominal wall the unborn children are poked at, each part of their tiny bodies injured. [14]

At birth the programmers see to it that the child first sees the person who will play a large part in the programming. In the eighteen months following the child’s birth, the personal programmer will coax the child lovingly. During this period, loving words are the only things the child will hear. This way an intense bond between the child and the programmer develops

naturally. The splitting of the child's mind will not be long following this period of "bonding" .

After the child is showered with love, everything that is safe and good is taken away. The child's mind is manipulated in such a way that it eventually becomes numb. The child suffers hunger and cold and is left naked. To instill fear and obedience, the child is subjected also to electroshocks. [15]

When the child sees his loving master after all this suffering (usually after forty-two to seventy-two hours of pain), he is highly emotional and carefully puts away the memory of the previous painful hours. The child is happy and believes that help has finally come. In that specific moment, the programmer will show his most horrible side and force the child to come to terms with the events by assuming another personality. The former loving caretaker has turned into the child's worst enemy. The child cannot comprehend the two extremes of his programmer: "loving caretaker" and "torturer". The person the child trusted most is now also the one he fears the most. [16]

The next step is to establish whether or not the experiment was successful. This test is usually executed when the child is about eighteen months old. The victims are tested to find out if they can dissociate enough before the special programming can commence.

The original and most important torture to definitely split a child's mind was first carried out by Mengele at a California Air Force base. The base was built to "test new weapons". Most of these "new weapons" involved the production of human robots on a large scale. The production process of this Monarch mind control program took place in an airplane hangar. In this hangar were thousands of small cages stacked as high as the ceiling. Each cage was just large enough to hold a baby. There were about 2000 babies stocked in the hangar. [17]

The cages had the macabre name "woodpecker grids". The cages in which the babies were locked were electrified so that electroshocks could be applied at any moment. The purpose here was again to split these children's personalities. [18]

The victims were also subjected to sharp light flashes. These flashes were applied as a means of hypnosis, causing them to imagine themselves living in another dimension. After the children had spent days in the woodpecker

grid, the real trauma would start: “the raping”. These rapes were cruel and bestial, leaving the memory of it as very traumatic to the child. [19]

The programmers also used video footage that influenced the subconscious. For this purpose, they used large projectors that looked like binoculars. The crucial difference was that the right and left eye were showing completely different images. Through the right viewer, positive films such as fairytales were shown. Through the left eye was shown a horror show that consisted of horrific images of movies of sexual acts in which people are actually killed (snuff movies) and all sorts of ceremonial and ritual cruelties. [20]

To traumatize the children, the programmers also used trained dogs, monkeys and other animals as part of the programming. To split the children’s personality, they were often locked in a cage full of spiders and snakes. Moreover, the children were given soft drugs, which were administered through injections, while music was being played in the background. The application of this programming with children had several goals:

- To cause pain;
- To force out-of-body experiences (experiences during which one has the feeling that the mind leaves the body);
- To intensify the trauma;
- To position each created alter ego in the desired tier or part of the child’s brain;
- To reduce the child’s memory capacity.

Other tortures

Victims of Monarch programming are also traumatized by being lowered upside down on ropes into water; drowned and then resuscitated. Keeping a victim under water and simulating death by drowning is a predominantly traumatic torture technique that commonly creates multiple personalities.

The water tortures also make the individual terrified of water.

Why make a Monarch slave fearful of water?

A Monarch slave need to be fearful of water, because some of the alters that protect the programming have a weak point. An individual infatuated with water is able to destroy those alters that protect the programming. [21]

To gain full dominance over the life of the victim, the programmers use the most terrifying tortures. Children are buried alive or hung by their hands and feet while being sexually abused. Rabbits, dogs and cats are brutally slaughtered while the children watch or take part in the killings. Dogs and snakes are used for sexual acts with children. Human faeces, urine, sperm and blood play important roles in humiliation sessions. Children are rubbed with these bodily fluids and often forced to drink a cocktail mixture of the fluids. The live skinning and bleeding to death of victims is also used quite often. [22]

When the child reaches the age of five, his own will has been completely destroyed. In the place of the individual innate will and opinion is now the manipulative, dependent slave. The weak and strong points of the child are specifically documented and consequently it's decided what role each child will fulfill in society. In detail the programmers describe what the assignment of a certain child will be and what it will mean for our "elite".

Of major importance here is the difference between Monarch slaves within the hierarchy and those outside. The way the two types of slaves are programmed is different.

The abuse of the hierarchic Monarch slaves will not be visible on their physique, which is common with the slaves who don't belong to the elite. Even though the scars of torture and control are not visible in the members of hierarchic slaves, they too suffer many traumas.

The programming of the Monarch slaves within the hierarchy always has been planned before their birth. Beforehand, our "elite" determine the position a child will take in the hierarchy. The child is usually conceived during a satanic ritual. His or her life will exclusively and completely be determined by our "elite".

Many Monarch slaves within the hierarchy have been programmed to be multifunctional and are expected to be able to program other slaves .

Monarch slaves outside the hierarchy are indispensable to the "elite families". They come in the shape of saboteurs, drug runners, murderers and suppliers of children. They are used to serve a certain purpose before being killed, often at a young age. [23]

Such Monarch slaves mostly come from the Third World where they have been sold by their parents or given up to adoption agencies. Many others come from refugee camps all around world.

Some of the future slaves outside the hierarchy are being born from women who have been programmed themselves. All these women have been told that it's a great honor to sacrifice their children to Satan. Because these mothers "willingly" give up their children, these things hardly reach the outside world. [24]

The extreme violence, the ritualistic sexual abuse , the mental torture, electroshock, the sadistic games and other modern techniques inflicted on the children prove the existence of a true "dark satanic side" in the powers that be.

In fact, among the "elite" there are some generational satanic families. They have been sold to Satan and their children, therefore, belong to the devil in a very special way. The fetuses of children from such families undergo demonization during special rituals. These kinds of rituals in which such demonization take place are also called "moonchild rituals". Creating these moonchildren is the greatest achievement in the sphere of magic these devil artists carry out. The thought behind creating a moonchild is that a perfect and clean soul is captured. This emotionally charged ritual is always accompanied by animal or even human sacrifice (blood rituals) .

Satanic sexual abuse of a child is more powerful when it is put into the context of demonic magic. During these rituals they often tie their victims with wire and hang them by their hands and feet while being sexually abused. Many of these children lose their toes or fingers from the wire. At times little fingers and the top part of ring fingers are lost in these rituals too.

After the foundational programming the children are being bonded to their subsequent caretakers. Some children are placed in special institutions, foster homes or orphanages. Others are positioned with adoptive parents. [25]

After the children return from their initial programming, they receive daily traumas to keep them in a permanent programmable (dissociative) state. The caretakers are also given special instructions on how to raise and prepare the child for future programming.

Because many children are at the mercy of non-related adults, these types of children frequently are sold to become mind controlled slaves for the Sex Industry. To prepare children for the forthcoming sexual programming, they will be raped daily and tortured. This helps with the sexual programming

later, and begins a reversal in the mind that pain is love, and pain is pleasure.

Beta sex slaves

Sexual slaves, frequently labeled Beta "Sex Kittens" are programmed to possess skills to use their charm, optimize seductive skills, and to be creative and charismatic.

There are different types of sexual slaves. Some are used for espionage, prostitution and blackmail. Political leaders and ministers are often connected to Betas so that they can be blackmailed at any desired moment .

The programming of "Betas" eliminates all learned moral convictions and stimulates the primitive instinct, devoid of inhibitions. This form of mind control turns the female victim into nothing more than a "piece of meat", not only to be used, but also to be abused by their slave handler, at any time. When triggered, these Betas will perform any action required by the slave handler.

Beta programming is the most visible kind of programming. Many female celebrities, fashion models, actresses and singers have been subjected to the Sex Kitten programming. Most public figures we see on our television– and movie screens are mind control Beta slaves. It is obvious that if you control these celebrity slaves, then you also somehow control all of the sheep in the general population that follow them.

Beta sex slaves are also the ideal candidates for porn– and snuff movie productions. They are as well the perfect puppet performers for the music entertainment industry.

Rihanna's *Bitch Better Have My Money* and *The Handler* by Muse are some of the most blatant music videos about Monarch Total Mind Control. The lyrics, images and hints in these videos are the clearest representation of Monarch programming.

Most supermodels are mind controlled Beta sex slaves or Monarch mind control subjects. They are the ideal candidates for prostitution.

Very special Beta sex slaves (mostly fashion models) are created at the service for members of the "elite". These models are numbered and offered in hidden editions of special fashion catalogues. These "Sex Kittens" are being paraded for sale at fashion shows on the "catwalks". Glossy magazines like Bazar, Cosmopolitan, Elle and Vogue, are just catalogs for

slave handlers and those in the know to keep up to date on the latest and hottest Beta slaves available for use and abuse .

The primary function of these specific Beta models is to provide sex, usually “perverted sex” and “Sadism and Masochism” (S&M). After being programmed, experts in sex give these Betas “finishing lessons”, so that the sexual alters can perform incredible sexual feats with which normal prostitutes are not likely to be able to begin to compare.

The fashion world is a disgusting depraved industry. It is not only a prostitution ring which masks itself by calling it the “Fashion industry”, it is also completely soaked to the skin in the terrible world of Monarch programming. Like the music industry, the Fashion industry is full of blatant Monarch symbolism.

Delta slaves

Deltas are assassination alters. They are known as “Delta killers”; programmed Monarch slaves with one purpose: to kill. They are the perfect scapegoats for high-profile assassinations.

Mind controlled Delta units can also be found within the US military. Delta Forces and the First Earth Battalion got mind controlled slaves scattered throughout all of the regular branches.

Within the intelligence organizations some of the big offenders are MI6 and Naval Intelligence. Mind controlled slaves can be found as well in a lot of US government organizations like the CIA, the FBI and NASA.

Without the ability to carry out this sophisticated type of mind control, these organizations would fail to keep their dark evil deeds secret. As mentioned before, the Monarch Total Mind Control program makes sure that the Monarch slaves do their work without revealing any secret plans. Without these Monarch slaves there will never be a New World Order. They make sure that the entire spectrum of their affairs and units can be controlled and kept secret .

Satanism and occult bloodlines

Do you believe in the existence of the devil? Or do you think that the devil is a product of superstition and human fantasy? Does a personified evil spirit that calls himself Lucifer really exist?

If you don’t believe in the existence of the devil, it might surprise you that the ruling elite of this world do. The members of the exclusive family dynasties belong to the leading Satanists of the world. They consider Lucifer to be their only and true god.

From the beginning of the world until now, the basic doctrine of the “satanic religion” has been the conviction that one day Lucifer will openly rule this world. As long as we do not understand this dogma, we shall never understand why the elite are trying to move humanity towards a world dictatorship. As long as our global elite considers the devil to be their god and believes that Lucifer’s ultimate goal is establishing a dictatorial world power, everybody on earth will experience the daily consequences of this.

As a final point it is necessary to explain the important role "bloodlines" play within the higher circles of the ruling elite families. To understand Nathalie´s story, it is also important to know the significance of the bloodlines of the elite.

According to the ruling families, the power of a human being is stored in the blood. Therefore they explore and accumulate their bloodlines. They seek to capture the power of the most powerful bloodlines around the world. It is known that members of the “elite” have intermarried with native tribes to gain the occult power that some of these bloodlines contributed. For example the Cherokee have high paranormal abilities in addition to their demonic spiritual abilities.

The elite draw their lifeblood from around 500 very powerful families worldwide. Half of them have had their parentage hidden from them. Most of the elite´s offspring do not know their real parents. Although many of them are adopted out, the records of what families they belong to are carefully kept, and their bloodlines hidden by their adopted last names. Many of them do not know what family they belong to until the privileged choose to reveal it to them.

A common practice amongst the elite is to secretly have an important child quietly adopted out to another family. The child then takes on another last name, which hides the genealogy.

Nathalie

Nathalie has undergone “Monarch mind control” programming. She has gone through a lot. She did not know that the source of many of the incomprehensible events had to do with her programming. She had no idea that she was a programmed Monarch slave. Nathalie woke up at the age of 36, after having flashbacks. Occurrences that she is aware of nowadays were unknown to her in the past. This is reflected in her story.

For that reason, occasional extra explanation was needed. Each time Nathalie describes one of the bizarre events that took place throughout the time that she was not yet aware of her being programmed, additional explanation is added by me in italics, directly under the relevant part of the story.

I hope that my extensive analysis makes Nathalie´s story more comprehensible, so that you are able to recognize the patterns in her story. You will not only gain important insights into the world of the Fashion industry, it is also an outstanding piece of information about Monarch Mind Control.

Nathalie´s story

Sexual Harassment by Harvey Weinstein

In October 2017 the doors in Hollywood opened to reveal to the world how well-known men in Hollywood work and what women have to do to get a job.

Tapes released proved how Harvey Weinstein, one of the co-founders of “Miramax Films” who achieved international fame as a film producer, tried to get a young female into his hotel room and bed.

Shortly after the release of the tapes dozens of Hollywood actresses, among them Gwyneth Paltrow, Ashley Judd and Angelina Jolie, accused Weinstein of sexual abuse over a period of at least 30 years. More than 80 women in the film industry have subsequently accused Weinstein of such acts.

These news flashes set off a ring of fire. The scandal triggered a great number of women to share their own experiences of sexual assault, harassment or rape on social media under the “hashtag#MeToo”.

Two months later hundreds of well known Hollywood figures (directors, actors, managers and writers) were accused of sexual harassment and drug rape. Some of the accusers openly used the words: “Mind programming plays an important role here”.

Roseanne Barr talked about how many fashion models are mind programmed to become sexual slaves, especially young girls entering the Hollywood scene. In a TV interview with Barbara Walters, she was not exaggerating. “I’ve been screwed every possible way,” she stated.

Finally the protection shield used by Hollywood to hide and protect the Hollywood elite and actors cracked open. Why bother was all I thought. These things do not only happen in Hollywood.

The fashion world is as dangerous as Hollywood; both intricately connected. Fashion models suffer sexual assault, rape and mind control. Hollywood needs the fashion world. Not just for the clothing and styling. The moment girls or boys set foot into a modeling agency and sign themselves in, they are regarded as fresh new innocent meat.

The Fashion industry is sinful, sick and a front for “prostitution” and pedophiles. Many models are being paraded for sale.

To keep up-to-date on the latest and hottest fashion models available, many actors and other important men visit the fashion shows. They also check exclusive fashion magazines, specially made for them. Home shopping mail-order fashion catalogues offering the latest in models.

Johnny Depp is one of the many actors who love to roam the fashion world to get access to very young girls. Believe me, he is not the only one.

Are you wondering where this is going?

From1980 to 1995 I worked as a fashion model. Fifteen years in the world of make believe, where nothing is what it seems. I was drugged and raped by high ranking politicians, famous actors and singers, royalties and members of the richest elite families of this world.

I was also hunted down by directors and casting agents, including actors all trying to lure me into Hollywood. I was suspicious and refused to go. Something simply was not correct.

I am a “mulata”, not white. Back in those days, dark-skinned girls did normally not get jobs in Hollywood. So when they told me Hollywood is waiting for you, all I thought was, “Yeah right. The spiteful Hollywood chiefs and actors who want to get me into their beds are waiting for me.” So I never went direction Los Angeles nor Hollywood.

I always regarded the United States as a danger zone. I knew whatever happened in my life, I would never go to that part of the world. At that time I thought that I was safe in Europe.

My parents

I was supposedly born in the Netherlands on the 8th of November 1962 at 11:11 hours. My parents came from the island of Curacao. I was supposed to be the oldest daughter. But that was a lie. With time, I discovered that my father and mother were not my real parents. They only had three children of their own. There was a little brother and two younger sisters.

I remember that my childhood was hard, abusive and very dangerous. I grew up being very aware of the worlds of adults. I knew people that were violent and dangerous satanic pedophiles, child hoppers, toddler poppers and baby droppers. My parents did not believe in God; yet they believed very much in the devil.

My mother had a strange network around her. She had many contacts with people who were related to the military. She also had political ties to members of the political circuit.

The house we lived in was a strange place where the parents kept bringing in babies. I do not know where these babies came from. They stayed always for a short time. Then they were picked up.

My mother was very brutal to the babies. She even tortured them. This was the reason why three of the babies were taken away from her by the Dutch childcare system. A few months later, although they knew that she tortured the little ones, they dropped the babies back in her lap. Very strange! Although the Dutch childcare system is not really into protecting children, this was not common and unusual.

When it came to my little brother, my mother was a hardcore pedophile. Once I walked in on her while she was giving her son a blow job. I do remember that I asked: “What are you doing?”

She told me that she did this so the dick of her son would grow big .

Whenever one of the children did not listen to her, she would call for the father and order him to discipline them. She would stand there smoking cigarettes, while watching the father was beat the child. I remember that she enjoyed watching. I think it gave her a false sense of power over the children.

There are many stories about the mother. When she was young, she dreamed of becoming an actress. She was a pretty girl and wanted to move to Hollywood. I discovered that she had used her looks to sleep with every man who could bring her closer to her dreams. When she was a young girl she slept with many military men and politicians.

The father was abusive in every way possible; he would scream, beat the hell out of the children and rape them, especially me. This only took place after my mother told him to beat or rape one of the children. It was as if he was being activated by the mother.

Rape and sexual abuse

I was raped more than any of the other children. Not only by the father, he also brought me to “high placed” politicians for sexual abuse. In their mansions, he always waited outside, mostly in the hallway. Sometimes he also would leave me, to come back later to pick me up. He was paid very well by these pedophiles.

I was not the only child trafficked like that by the father. There were strange children in our house off and on. They would only stay a short time. Then they would be taken to somewhere else. I never saw these children again. These memories are scattered.

There is one memory I do not forget. I must have been seven years old when I actually attacked a pedophile with a knife. My father brought me to an older politician in his mansion. This man lived alone as far as I remember. No wife or children were present in the house. The man opened the door, looked at me and let us in. I was planted in his office where there was a big sofa. I had to sit on the big sofa and wait.

The man went to the hallway with the father. As usual, he first had to pay the father. As I was sitting on the sofa I knew I was going to be raped again. I got up and looked at the office-desk and saw a letter-opener. It looked like a knife and before I realized what I was doing, I grabbed it, placed it in my sleeve and sat back on the sofa. When the man entered the room he started to take his clothes off and told me to lay down. He started to pull up my dress up. That same moment I plunged the letter-opener in his belly.

The man screamed and got up screaming for my father who was waiting in the hallway. He barged into the room. The man was holding his belly and screamed at the father, “I will call the police. This child is very dangerous.”

The father´s replied angrily. “Call the police if you want. But do not forget to tell them, that it happened because you wanted to rape her. You are dealing with the elections this year. You better be careful what you do.”

The father grabbed me and dragged me out of the house. “You are really dangerous. When you´re older you can hunt them down if you are still alive,” he said to me.

That day I became a rebel. I realized that I could defend myself against these pedophiles. Even more importantly, defend myself against my so-called parents as well.

The father warned my mother and told her what had happened. From that day on she never dared to touch me again. The father did also prohibited her from taking me anywhere. She was only allowed to take the other children with her.

Although I was still beaten by the father, he was more cautious with me. I challenged him and cursed him out all the time.

“When I am older, I will kill you,” I often said to him .

The father was convinced that one day I would go after him.

That same year I was brought to different places in the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany to be sexually abused by many men. These memories also come from flashbacks.

This is one of the first steps of the "Beta sex slave program". They were preparing Nathalie to become a Beta sex slave.

The lady dressed in white

I have hardly any memory of the first seven years of my childhood. Among the few photos I do have of myself, there is one as a baby and one with a lady dressed in white and a little boy. By flashbacks I know, that the white lady not only did take care of me when I was a baby, she also was present in the early days of my toddler years. I remember that we played games all the time. She also lectured us in drawing and repeating words and sentences.

I also remember that someone placed me a number of times in front of large crystal screens with other children. We had to play “War games”. I always won these games; never lost one. The losers were replaced by other children. Many children were af-raid and cried most of the time. They were also replaced.

I also have memories about a kind of hospital and men in white doctor coats. In this hospital, they showed me images from films and photos. There was also something with numbers. They showed me many numbers telling and explaining things I do not recall.

I only have memories of the white lady during my toddler years. There are no memories of my so-called father and mother at all. They appear at a much later age. To be precise, they appear when I was about seven years old.

The first seven years of her childhood, Nathalie has undergone Monarch mind control programming.

Confusing photographs

The story of my childhood is a confusing one. The memories I have are very contradictory. They come from flashbacks, occurrences my brother and sisters told me later in life and some family photos. Unfortunately, these photos do not match with the few memories I have of the first years of my childhood.

My mother once gave me a few photos. One photo of a baby and some of a toddler. On the different photos, the toddler was between two and four years old. According to her, I was the baby and the toddler in the pictures.

The first thing that struck me was, that nor the baby nor the toddler in the pictures, had any birthmarks on their bodies or face. I have a bundle of birthmarks. One in the middle of my lower neckline, one at my right eyebrow, one in my neck on the right side and three on my left leg.

Among the photos my mother gave me, there is also a photo, supposedly of me in an apartment and one in front of an impressive mansion. There is another one on a balcony of a flat with the mother.

When I asked my mother about these houses, she always claimed that we lived in all those houses. But, I have no memory of any of these houses. I remember only the house where I lived in.

It is also strange that when you look at the family photos of the parents and their own children, I do not appear on any.

The same applies to the photos of my first childhood. You don't see any of their children on these photos either. They should have been present on any of my photos. But they are not.

More confusion

It is important to keep in mind that I am supposed to be the oldest daughter. My parents claimed that my brother was only ten months younger than me.

The first time I appear on a picture with my brother is when I am about eight years old. I am standing behind the brother. He stands in front of me, but does not look like he is just ten months younger than me. He looks like he is only about five years old. Compared to him I look much older. I am very tall and you see clearly that I am at least three years older than the brother.

At the same pictures with my brother, you can also see that something horrifying had happen to me. If you look at my face you can see clearly that I must have endured horrors.

From the time I was raised by the lady in white to my seventh years, there are almost no memories. There are hardly any recollections. I do not know anything about these hidden years. It is a huge mystery.

What happened to me? Where did I come from? I have no memory of the father, mother, brother or sisters at my early age. They appear at a much later age. As said before, they appear when I was about seven years old.

I remember that at one moment, I was picked up from a hospital and that I was brought to the house of my so-called parents. From this moment on my family appears.

I also remember asking my mother one time, why the brother was so small, if he was only 10 months younger than me.

“Believe me, there is only a difference between both of you of 10 months. You are very tall. That´s why you look older,” was her answer. At that time, I believed her.

You´re not our daughter

Another thing that does not match is the age of the mother. She was born in 1948. I was born as far as the current truth goes in November 1962. This means that my mother had to be fourteen years old when she gave birth to me. I often questioned her about this. But she always gave me another age of her giving birth to me. Once she said she was sixteen years old when she gave birth to me. At a later date she told me she was eighteen. No doubt that she was lying.

She never gave birth to me. This was confirmed by the father. “You’re not our daughter. When you are older make sure you find out who you are,” he once said to me.

At the Roman Catholic Orphanage

My mother disappeared regularly for a long time, leaving the children in the hands of the father. I remember that one day, after being away for several months, she suddenly returned home. The following day she attacked the father with a knife.

Neighbors heard the children screaming and called the police. They came in and brought all children into safety at different orphanages. I and my sisters were brought to a Roman Catholic Orphanage called “Little Bethlehem” in the South of the Netherlands, near the Belgium border. The orphanage was run by Dominican nuns.

I must have been nine years old and I do remember the stay at “Little Bethlehem” very well. When we arrived at the orphanage my sisters were put in a different part of the Convent. I was placed with a group of older children.

What I remember from this orphanage was that I was questioned a lot. It started after they discovered that I was surprisingly good at painting planets, stars and other things about the universe. I would always put a womb in the middle of the painting telling the Dominican nuns that the womb represented earth. When they asked me about the paintings, I told them whole stories about the universe. They were very surprised about my knowledge. Up to now I do not know where I got the wisdom from. For an unknown reason the priests kept questioning me about things like who is God? Where does God live and do you know his name? I never understood their questions. I cannot remember a normal school while in the orphanage. Only that I was educated by an older nun.

From that moment I entered “Little Bethlehem” things went different for me. I was treated very well. However, I remember that I was very rebellious, because I did not trust adults at all. The nuns called me the child of the devil. In my opinion, this was not so surprising, given my so-called parents. However, the nuns never laid their hands on me. When I did not behave, I was locked up in the old library of the orphanage. I did not mind. I loved reading. I just would grab their old books and read the days away.

As a child I was very good at dancing. Therefore the nuns put me at classic ballet lessons in the convent. Lamentably, for a short time only.

“There is no place for a black ballerina in the Netherlands,” one day the ballet teacher screamed at me.

This happened during a foot test. The ballet teacher checked how long I could dance on my toes. He was hitting me on my feet with a long stick. Since that moment I have a total black out. Don´t remember anything. The next memory comes from the moment I wake up in a hospital with both my feet in casts. Then everything turns black again.

The next memory goes back to the day my mother came to visit us at the orphanage. The father was not around. She came with a male friend. She brought a toddler boy of two years and a baby girl with her as well .

My mother told the nuns that she wanted to take me and my sisters to the zoo. The nuns had no objection.

Instead of taking us to the zoo, my mother kidnapped us. She took us to a house in Amsterdam. To my horror the father opened the door.

The father had turned into a drugs dealer and pimp. He had about fifty whores working for him. He also walked around with guns. If one of his whores did not pay up, he just shot her in her hands or legs as a warning. No police ever came to arrest him for what he did. It was almost as if he fell under some kind of protection by the Dutch state.

In Amsterdam we stayed for two weeks in the house of the father. During these weeks he tried to rape me one time. But he failed because I turned against him with a knife in my hand ready to stab him. He backed off and left me alone.

A new orphanage

After two weeks, childcare discovered that we lived in Amsterdam. I was picked up and taken to a Catholic orphanage far away from Amsterdam. As far as I can remember, I did not go to school during my stay at this orphanage.

I cannot remember how long I stayed at this orphanage. However, I do remember the day I was picked up and brought to another orphanage called “Welcome home” in a small town in the East of the Netherlands near the German border.

Given to what happened in the new orphanage, makes it clear that Nathalie must have been part of a determined mind control program.

Painful memories

The following memories are still very alive. They bring me back to the new orphanage and the period when I must have been between ten and eleven years old. A as far as I remember, in the beginning things in the new orphanage were normal. But then things started to change. I have many strange and painful memories from this orphanage.

What happened in the orphanage?

Several times they gathered the children up late at night. We had to take a seat in a bus with dark windows. Then they drove us to a dark forest, where they dropped us. They told us that we had to find our way back home on our own, leaving us in the forest.

I remember these droppings very well. The age of the children was between six and twelve years old. Most of them panicked and started to cry. They feared the dark.

I did not have this problem. I am not afraid of the dark. I told the other children to follow me. It took me some time, but I found my way back to the orphanage.

At the orphanage they were surprised. “How did you make it home?” they asked me.

I experienced such droppings at night about five times. I always found my way back. One time, when we returned, four girls were missing. I told the caretakers that they were missing.

“Don´t worry; they have been found,” they responded.

The next day at breakfast the girls were not present. I asked again for the girls. By noon they told me that the parents of the girls had picked them up.

I knew that something was not right, because two of these girls had no parents. I kept asking for these girls. But the caretakers silenced me. “It is not of your business.”

I never saw these girls again .

After a stay of several weeks in the orphanage, they sent me to a school, that was not quite a normal school. This school was connected in a strange

way to the U.S. Military.

All teachers at this school were military employees. Among other things, they had great interest in those children who were good at gymnastics. They just stood there watching us. Together with the gymnastics teacher, a nasty fat old military man, they pointed at certain children, including me.

“That´s because I am good in gymnastic,” I thought.

After one month I was picked up from the orphanage by a military truck and brought to a huge pavilion on a military depot for American army equipment. [26]

There was also a group of little children, when I arrived at the pavilion. They did not come from the orphanage where I was staying.

We all had to sit on the benches in rows. Then soldiers and a few men dressed in suits came in. They stood in front of the children checking them out. Then they selected some of them. These children had to follow them.

One day I was selected as well. I remember getting up and standing in a row with other children. Then we had to follow a few soldiers. I cannot remember exactly what happened next. There are black spots when it comes to this episode. But I do remember that I was returned to the orphanage.

There are also a few flashbacks, telling me that these men where pedophiles. I do not know what they did to me. My guess is that I was sexually abused just like the other children who were picked out.

One day at school we had to write an essay about pregnant women. We had to explain how a baby grows in the mothers belly and what effect the pregnancy had on the baby. When the papers were given back to the teacher, he kept mine in his hands and started reading. “Where do you get all this information from? How do you know these things?” he then asked me.

I did not understand his questions. Based on his questions, it seemed that I had written about something very imperative, not related to the assignment. I was very surprised too. I only remembered that something inside me had dictated me what to write. I didn´t tell this to the teacher.

The next day three high military officials walked into the classroom. They wanted to know who wrote my essay. The teacher pointed towards me.

“We cannot allow this, we have to do something about that child,” screamed one of the military officials. Then they left the classroom.

Tortured

The next day, when everybody had to go to school, I was not allowed to get in the bus. I had to stay at the orphanage. After a while I was picked up by a military car that brought me to a location where we had to go through a secured gateway. I remember soldiers walking around. For the rest I have little recollections, only some flashbacks.

At one moment I woke up and noticed that I was hanging upside down. I felt extreme pain in my feet. I remember how I was held by my ankles above water. This happened in an indoor swimming pool. They lowered me in the water to see how long I could hold my breath. I have images of older men in uniforms and also men in white doctor coats. They spoke Dutch and English.

"So you think you are...," one of them screamed at me. That is all. I do not remember the rest of the sentence.

This memory gives me a creepy feeling up to today. I was a very good swimmer. Diving and swimming was one thing I really liked very much. These people ruined my love for water for ever. Up to today I am very afraid of water.

For the rest I have no idea what they did to me or what else happened there. What I do know is that I went into the orphanage with normal feet and that I came out with two broken toes on both feet. I mean, my little toes had been broken and left to heal by themselves. Up to today you can see that they broke my little toes. They never grew back straight but sideways. That is a problem for me up to today, when it comes to buying shoes.

The next thing I remember after the "water tortures" is that I find myself back in the orphanage about a year later. All of a sudden I was 13 years old.

As explained in the introduction, a Monarch slave needs to be fearful of water, because some of the alters that protect the programming have a weak point. An individual immersed in water is able to destroy those alters that protect the programming.

Why was water torture applied to Nathalie? What she wrote in the essay is unknown. Did she perhaps disclose codes or other important information that was programmed in her subconscious mind?

Was there a weak point in her system? Were there alters that had to be destroyed to protect the program?

Nathalie disappeared for one year. Was she re-programmed or did they perhaps start the Beta sex program?

After one year I find myself back at the orphanage sitting on a chair with a little boy on my lap. I felt that I had to take care of him. Then I hear myself talking to the boy. "Your name is strange. I have never heard such a name before."

One caretaker came running. "It is time. You have to go home. They are here to pick you up. "

From that moment on things went really quick. To cut a long story short, I was picked up by my mother and her new boyfriend. I wanted to say goodbye to the little boy. But they did not let me. I screamed. Then they forced me into a car.

After they picked me up, we supposedly went to the house of my mother in a town called Leiden. But we never made it to that town. They brought me to a big building where I had to stay. Everything is dark since the moment I entered the building.

There is only one flashback. I do not know if this really happened or that I was in a sort of "trance state".

At night I was put in a forest with other children and hunted. I remember me running at night trying to escape. They called it the little fox hunt.

All I know is that one year later, I suddenly live with my mother in Leiden. I recall that I was 14 years old.

That same year my brother and my sisters were brought to the house. During the past years my mother had left them in different orphanages and caretaker´s families.

The day they arrived, my mother started to look for a school. Not only for them, also for me.

So, I had not been to school from the moment that my mother had picked me up from the orphanage. I had not been to school for more than one year. Another episode of my life in darkness. I admit that it took me a while to be able to think about the things that were done to me as a child without getting angry.

Between the ages of 10 and 14, Nathalie must have undergone different types of Mind Control programs. Her pre-programming almost certainly began when she was a baby.

Teenage years

From the moment my brother and sisters started to live in the house, my mother left me alone. As if they granted me to go through my teenage years without the need to interfere.

Did everything go smooth without strange things happening when I grew up into a young adult? No, but that would be too much to write down.

One thing happed that changed me like black and white. That was the day I got my period for the first time. I was still fourteen years old going fifteen. That day I went out. Something in my head told me to buy as many white lilies as I could get. I also bought a poster from a white lily. Then I painted my sleeping room black and white. Sat down, closed my eyes and all of a sudden, I became extremely interested in fashion. I wanted to become a fashion designer. This was very strange, because I never had any interest in fashion at all.

The same day I also started out of the blue, doing certain bathing rituals. I have no idea how I knew about these rituals.

During my teenage years the past disappeared gradually. I never really forgot, but it faded into the background. I did not think about it any longer.

I grew up in a fairly normal way. My mother did not dare to touch me. I was really extremely rude to her. But most of the time I ignored her.

By that time I knew that things were not quite normal with the mother. She did not have to work. She got money from the Dutch state doing nothing. It was not the normal “welfare”. In the Netherlands people on welfare are forced to look for jobs.

By the time I was seventeen years old I was very independent and wise for my age. Nobody could tell me what to do. Nor did I trust anybody .

In many ways I developed like any other female teenager into a young girl. I loved creating new outfits. As said before, I wanted to become a fashion designer. At the age of sixteen I went to a fashion school.

At that time I had no interest in a career as a fashion model. I hated to be photographed. In fact if somebody wanted to take pictures, I would run

away. I used to call the camera the “eye of the devil”. Taking a photo from somebody was to me as trapping a human’s soul. This is why there are by my knowing only four pictures taken of me between fourteen and eighteen years old.

Around that same period I had a small problem, which only happened at home, never in other places. I started to faint. Suddenly I felt something strange, hear a high-pitched sound and then I would faint. At times I could feel it coming and I was able to run to my bedroom to faint in my bed. The doctor had no idea what it was. It started when I was fifteen years old and suddenly stopped the day I started to work as a fashion model when I was eighteen years old.

I had no idea about altered states or mind control programming. I was just too young. At that time I did not know anything of mind control. Today I know that they during three years were testing the connection with my program and those who are living inside my brain.

The activation of my program must have started earlier but I don't know exactly when. Today I think that maybe I was activated the day when I all of a sudden became interested in fashion. Or was it maybe the day I said yes to become a fashion model? Was I activated the day I started to work as a fashion model?

Entering the modeling scene

From my sixteenth year on I was asked to work as a fashion model. I kept refusing until one day I was invited to a model agency run by Corinne Spiers in Amsterdam. It was early summer and I went there with Sandra, one of my friends.

Corinne got up from her chair when we entered her office. “We have discovered you thanks to the fashion school where you study. Have you ever thought about becoming a model?” she asked.

I had to laugh. “Hell no, no way.”

Corinne was clearly surprised. “You don't want to be a model? You are a born model and you should be a model.”

Then she turned me towards the mirror. “Look! Look at yourself. We need a girl like you. We need more color amongst our models. You have really beautiful hair which is rare for a colored model.”

At that time I thought, that the only reason she said that, was due to the fact that at that time there were hardly any black females working in the fashion business. We had Pam Grier and Iman being the top black models. They were like single units in magazines. This caused talks about racism in the fashion world. For that reason many agencies wanted colored girls. In the beginning of the eighties black models where mostly used for the catwalk scene.

I had read a lot about the fashion world. How the model industry exploits models, the bad working conditions, non-payments and the high cost of a set card. I did not like it all.

To my own surprise I accepted Corinne´s proposal. I don´t know why, but remember that something forced me to accept.

I looked at Corinne her face. “Ok, but I refuse to pay for my own set card or for any other expenses. I also refuse to go to all these castings. ”

Corinne laughed. “Ok deal. And don't you worry about the castings, you are different. They will ask especially for you, if they want to see you.”

I was an 18-year-old teenager and entered the modeling scene through Corinne Spiers into the fashion world. Corinne kept her word. For as long as I worked as a fashion model, unlike other fashion models, I never ever paid any expenses or for my own set card. This was always the cost for whatever agency demanded me.

Even that I officially did not want to be a model, I became one just like that. And this is what was very strange. I hated cameras, I ran away from cameras and here I was saying yes to become a fashion model.

Bizarre bookings

To start, I did two testshootings (unpaid photoshoots), so that the agency would have some photos from me to show her clients. One testschooting was fairly normal; me with open hair smiling in jeans and a sweater. Me on the beach in jeans and t-shirt and one profile photo from behind. There was nothing wrong with the first testshooting.

It was the second testshooting that made my eyebrows rise. It was an ordered testshooting Corinne did not tell me about it. It was in a huge "canal palace" at the Keizersgracht, one of the most expensive canals to live on in Amsterdam. Whose palace it was, was kept a secret. The inside was like a museum, extremely luxurious. The toilet seats where from gold. Even the tab water lines were made of gold. It was really ridiculous.

The photographer was not allowed to take photos from anything in the house but in one room only. There were security guards in the palace as well. They dressed me in some very old fashion dress. Then they put me on a sofa in front of some huge painting. I had to sit down and spread my arms over the back of the sofa, like some dying swan scene.

I thought the photo to be hideous. They looked weird. I looked like a little girl dressed in her grandmother's dress. I looked like some weird Alice in Wonderland doll with the painting in the background.

This testshooting was arranged through Corinne herself. I have no idea what they did or happened with the photos. Who paid for this shooting day was also a mystery to me. My questions have never been answered by Corinne.

After three weeks I got my first official bookings. One was for a young aspiring new designer. One for a well-known Dutch magazine and one for a hair shampoo.

After these bookings I became 'the talk of the town' New fresh meat in the modeling scene. Not just a white model, but a "mulata", an exotic girl. Other models insisted that it was not common that I started to work right away.

In the second month I was booked for a job in an old hotel in some far off location. It was located next to a train rail route and different highways.

I remember that I was a bit alerted when the taxi stopped in front of the old hotel. It was literal in the middle of nowhere. The hotel was very small and looked like some old typical Dutch farmhouse.

“What a strange hotel, what a strange location,” I thought.

I entered and to my surprise it looked much bigger from the inside than from the outside. Although the lobby looked normal, the moment you passed it in direction hotel rooms, it turned into a strange labyrinth. The employees that worked there was a middle age Dutch couple. The service was perfect and the room rather luxurious compared to how the hotel looked like from the outside .

Something strange happened the moment I went to bed to go to sleep. From that moment on I cannot remember anything. No next morning, no studio or work. The memory start off, when I sit in a cab from the hotel, bringing me to the train station. At that moment it felt so strange. I remember this so well. I will never forget how I felt sitting there in the train going back home. Why couldn´t I remember anything? Who were these clients? I could not remember having met with them. What happened? To me it had been like some “fata morgana” moment. It was like I had entered a twilight zone. I felt used up and did not remember a darn thing. All I knew was that strange things happened there.

The next day at the agency other models asked me about the job. I just said that it was okay, but that the clothing was boring ugly. For the rest I kept my mouth shut. I did not tell anybody what had happened.

“I see everything is okay, you’re not wounded,” said Corinne, when a few days later she entered the agency.

I stood there looking at her and felt alarm bells going of. I asked myself what she meant by “you´re not wounded”.

When Corinne turned her face away, I knew that I couldn´t trust her; that I had to be cautious.

During the one and half year that I was with Corinne, I was booked for many shows.

My first big show as a catwalk model was for a fashion house well known in The Hague. Regardless that the clothes they sold were mega

expensive designer pieces, to me they looked like old fashion and extremely ugly woman clothing. Costumers were the wives and girlfriends of ambassadors and female politicians.

The show was held in the oldest church in The Hague. The church was packed with politicians and certain Dutch members of the leading families, as well as people from the film and TV world .

During the show two very important headpieces had to be shown. I was chosen to show these two pieces to the audience.

This was my first official fashion show and I was just a beginner. Certain models did not understand that I was chosen to show the two special headpieces on the catwalk. They did not know that the heads from the fashion house, all diehard gays, for some unknown reason loved me to death. My impression is that, for that reason I was chosen to show their two most important pieces.

One piece was made from gemstones covering my entire head and half my face falling down on my body like a rain of gemstones. It was a heavy piece of fashion art.

Everybody stood there looking at me behind stage when they put the piece on my head. I stood there looking at the audience and saw famous Dutch TV stars, older members of the rich elite families and many politicians with their wives or girlfriends.

Then it was time for me to take to the stage. Walking the stage I heard the remarks like a new star is born, goddess material, special model and many wows.

“Look at her; she looks like a goddess,” the men were yelling,

The 2nd special piece was a wedding gown. It was a hideous big puffy dress with a sort of birdcage crown. Not with birds closed in, but with birds hanging at the end of each piece of a metal robe; a sort of open birdcage. The headpiece was like a heavy crown on my head. I had to keep my head straight and very still, holding it while slowly turning.

Everybody was taken of me. Many compliments rained down on me. But it was not funny to me. Some models were jealous and the older models where checking me out; the new kitten in town with sharp eyes .

After the show, some politicians coming up to me, wanting to see me from close by. Many of them all of a sudden started to call me the next day.

These men gave me the creeps, especially due to the way they were looking at me.

After this fashion show I was the talk of the town. I received many new bookings. Lamentably, many of these bookings were about looking sexy, being dressed like some kitten and staring at the faces of horny old drooling photographers.

I had been thinking a lot about Corinne's agency. I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

The next booking was in Dusseldorf (Germany). It was not for a fashion show as I first thought. It was for a special high-class fitting job for a very important Arab corporation owned by a private elite Arab group. They were in Dusseldorf to buy the clothing for the Arab high-class females.

The job was paid extremely well. So I decided this would be my last job for Corinne.

There were five girls in total for this job. In Dusseldorf we stayed at a famous hotel which was strongly involved in the fashion scene. The presentation would be during the day but also at night.

At one point I was already sleeping, when I was called by the client. The Arabs had chosen me to show them the showstoppers, the best and most expensive part of the collection. I had to take a shower, did my makeup and by midnight I was standing there, showing the evening gowns to the Arabs. They brought two older females with them who had ultimately to decide which gowns to choose.

The next day we were sitting at Vic's for our dinner. We had the special room in this very exclusive and expensive restaurant.

All five models, the clients and assistants were there, when the glass doors opened and a group of Arab males (Dubai style) entered the room. One man came to me with a blue box. He gave the box to me. "Consider this as a thank you from us," he said.

I opened the box and to my shock I saw a necklace with two earrings diamonds and sapphires.

"Oh wow. Wow you´re lucky that is worth a million if not more," uttered the other models.

I looked at the greedy faces of the other models. The clients sat there in total silence.

I got up. “No, thanks, I cannot accept this gift. Please return it,” I said to the man who gave me the jewels.

Then I handed him the blue box. He was so surprised, that I had to smile. Yet they accepted and left.

“Are you crazy? If you don't like the jewels, why not accept them and sell them? Do you know what these jewels are worth?” the girls yelled.

”Hell no, when I accept their jewels, then I will become their sex slave,” I silenced them.

At that same moment the door opened again. The same Arabs entered the room. The same man walked up to me with a blue velvet pillow. On it there was one Baccara red rose.

I laughed. “Good guess, this I will accept.”

The Arab stood there and stared at me. “You are different, you´re not like the rest of the models we are used to. Many men will seek you out. Please take care of yourself,” he said.

Then they turned their backs and left the room.

Everybody on the table was silent. One of the clients looked at me. “Darn if not true, you are different. I wondered already about you. But now I know for sure,” he said.

I did not answer. Left things the way they were. I left the group with their own thoughts and believes .

Then came the next strange job. I was booked by a painter. After he took different photos from my face, he started painting. He painted my face above some clouds, looking down at the world. He called the painting “The Goddess”.

I asked him why he booked an expensive model.

“Why did you not use the face from any woman passing him by in the streets or just take some magazine and copy the face of a model? That would be much cheaper,” I said.

“I am hired to make this painting with your face. I did not book you. The painting has been ordered. They insisted that they wanted your face painted above the clouds,” he explained.

His answer set my mind racing. Who and why? Who would order such a stupid painting? Why especially my face and not that of a cheaper model?

The next day I realized one thing, it was time to leave Corinne's agency. I switched to the "Euromodel" agency, thinking now everything will be normal and I will get good jobs. I was received with joy at "Euromodel", because I brought my clients with me.

At "Euromodel" things normalized, the bookings were from fashion shows to the huge catalogs.

From the beginning that I started with "Euromodel" the bookings became of a higher quality. Good shows, good bookings and my day rate went up to 2.500 guldens (1.450 dollar), which was the maximum. This was the highest rate that you could get in the Netherlands in those years.

At the same token the interest of the men around me became huge. At one point I felt like I was hunted by all these men. Yet my sharp tongue kept them all away from me. I also stayed away from the clubs and from the parties I was invited to as a model.

I only went out with a few good friends. They were not from the modeling scene .

One day I was booked for a five days fitting job for a huge catalog.

On the first day of the fitting I had to show some bikinis. As a result, the clients called the agency and booked me for a three week job on location in Marbella (Spain).

This was my first job on location in another country. I was very thrilled. The booking was all about bathing suits and bikinis. The shootings were mostly done at the beach and the swimming pool of the hotel .

Things that happened in Marbella were a good wake up call for me, related to the dangers for models in the fashion industry.

We were stationed in a huge hotel which was gated. When we entered the hotel, I noticed that many people, especially males, had been waiting for the bus filled with models. All eyes were on us when we entered. I saw many males talking to each other and pointing at certain girls, including me. I thought to myself, you´d better watch out for these men.

One night the girls and boys were invited to go to Puerto Banus, a rich elite people hangout in Marbella. One of the clients warned the models to stick together and not to stray.

“Many girls and young models have disappeared in Puerta Banus,” he said.

He also claimed that this had something to do with all the rich Arabs who enter Puerto Banus with their yachts.

I decided not to go anywhere and stay right in the hotel.

The hotel was filled with many foreigners. From rich young Arab males to American actors. I thought, what a strange mix.

That night the models took of to that one big celeb party where American actors, people from the music industry and other famous people would also

attend to.

I stayed at the hotel. I decided to take a stroll in the hotel complex when I met a drop death gorgeous Arab male. We had a lot of fun and ended up drunk in my hotel room, where we fell asleep. I had violent and sexual dreams. Also images flashing in front of my eyes.

The next morning, when the phone rang, the Arab took the phone. He listened. “It is for you. They are calling you. You have to go downstairs. They are waiting for you.”

Then he gave me the phone.

I heard the voice of one of the female models. “Nathalie what have you done! You have a man in your room. He will not be happy!”

“Who will not be happy?” I asked.

“The photographer... Helmuth. You´d better come down, we are waiting.”

I jumped out of bed. “You better get out of my room. The photographer seems to be angry because you slept in my hotel room.”

“What! He does not own you.”

“Darn right.”

I got up, got dressed, grabbed my bag and went down to the lobby.The moment the other models saw me, they all started to talk. Then all of a sudden I hear the photographer screaming at me. “You made a grave mistake to have sex with XXX (name cannot be mentioned). You need to realize that you belong to them.”

When he said “them”, I looked at him. “Who do you mean by “them”? Who are you talking about? And another thing mister photographer, nobody owns me. Are you on drugs or what?”

I turned around and walked to the Arab who had followed me when I left the room. ”What is that man talking about. Owning you! Is he a pimp?”

I laughed. “No that is Helmuth, our photographer. ”

But darn, that was exactly what I thought a few moments ago. Helmuth behaved like a freaking pimp.

Helmuth must have been very angry. I heard him scream. “I make sure you never work again.”

Fact of the issue was that after the job in Marbella, I was rebooked by the same clients immediately. They booked me for six weeks in a row. This brought my first huge amount of cash in my hands.

At first there were shootings in a studio in Hamburg. After Hamburg we had to go to Gran Canaria (Canary Islands). The last shootings for these clients were again in Hamburg.

Warnings

One day an older female model tried to tell me something about the fashion industry; especially the modeling world. She warned me for it, how these men think and how they actually think that they own you as a model. As if you are their fresh new piece of meat entering their old stench world. She warned me very stern that girls like me where very hard looked for. That many men would come after me. That I, also had to watch out for being drugged. That´s what these man do; especially with beginning models.

“Look at you, you don't drink, don't use drugs, hell you don't even eat meat or use any diary. I mean look at how you eat. You eat only fruits, veggies and sweets. Look at yourself you are over twenty years old and yet you look like you are fifteen years old. They will hunt your ass for as long as you look like a teenager. I warn you. You´d better be sharp and watch out,” she said.

I asked her if she had ever been drugged.

“Yes, I have been drugged many times,” was her answer.

“Why did you stay in the business?”

“For the money, so I could buy me freedom. ”

I heard every word she said. Then I thought about everything that had happened to me thus far. Yet these negative factors faded quickly from my memory. The money was good and traveling had become dear to me.

So I decided to be sharp not to take any invitations, nor go to parties, if asked. Only if I wanted to, I would go somewhere, was my decision. I thought as a twenty year old. I thought that I could control matters myself. Actually, in retrospect, a huge mistake!

After the catalog job, I started to work as much as possible. No time to think about anything but work.

John Casablancas

John Casablancas was the founder of the Elite Model Management agency. He was a mastermind when it came to models for real dragging the millions of dollars paid campaigns into his agency by selling the correct girls. I think he was one of the most aggressive agents in the modeling world.

Casablancas was seen in the 80s as the man who could perform miracles for his girls. He was seen as one of the best if not the best agent in the fashion world. But it was not that he was such a good agent. He just had a huge male network; men with money who wanted these top models. One thing, that was seen as normal. Casablancas encouraged his young charges to enjoy a lifestyle of champagne, wild parties, drugs and sometimes more.

His network was also into drugging young girls, who normally would not look at these men, regardless if they were famous, rich or not, to have sex with them.

I know that the absolute female top models also were doing drugs and all had to give up their pussies. If these girls would not have given up their pussies for sex, they would have never ever become a top model. The same counts for the few top models of today. All have their sugar daddies in the business .

Casablancas became the “black beast” of the fashion industry when he had an affair with one of his 16 years old models. After a BBC undercover exposé about drugs, statutory rape and sex with underage models inside the agency, Casablancas was forced to retire from “Elite”. In 2008, he was convicted to 18 months in a county jail. Casablancas was just one child molester among many others.

There were certain members of the elite who had their own Lolita sex islands. Young girls were promised world fame and by private jets flown to these sex islands. Well known politicians, famous actors and some members of the richest families were invited to sex parties on these islands. Very young girls were drugged to have sex with them. Girls who were virgins where hunted the most.

Billionaire Jeffrey Epstein was such a man. He was not only a pedophile. He was also accused of recruiting dozens of underage girls into his sex-slave network. He had his private Caribbean island, known as “Orgy Island”. Flight logs show that many of the world famous men, among them Prince Albert and Bill Clinton, visited “Orgy Island” with Epstein’s private plane (The Lolita Express).

According to court papers, all the mansions were wired with hidden cameras. Why, did Epstein secretly record orgies involving prominent persons and underage girls? The ultimate purpose: blackmail.

The term “Supermodel”

It was the absolute beginning of the famous 80s for both the fashion world and the modeling world. John Casablancas had invented the supermodel phenomenon. The term supermodel was born.

We were professionals and we knew what we were worth. The models and their bookers became more business wise in the 80s; thus the wages went up crazy high .

The models back in those days had different mindsets than the models of today. There was more class and way more style back then.

The quality of high fashion was extremely good. Even the lower labels had a much better quality then what we see today. If I look at what happened to “Chanel” for instance. What a disgrace! Where is the grandeur from back then? I know Coco must be drinking her liver to shredders if she would be able to see what happened to her logo and especially who is wearing her logo and perfume these days.

After the Canary Islands I was working between the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany. From catalogs, to sport magazine, underwear– and bathing suits, fashion shows and trips to tropical islands. I loved the fashion shows the most.

Things were going well while I was at “Euromodel”. They really did their best to get me bookings in other countries. I had many show bookings. For that reason I had no suspicion towards them.

Sexual Abuse in Hamburg

Then came the day that I was booked again by the clients I had worked for in Marbella. It was for the same catalogue. I was very glad when I heard that Helmuth, the photographer who did the photos in Marbella, would not be around this time.

The booking was not in Spain, only for the studios in Hamburg. We were booked into a huge hotel, standing in the middle of a small forest. There was a running track around the hotel for joggers. To enter the hotel premises you had to turn away from a highway and drive up to a very long entrance road.

To me the hotel looked dark. It was a high class hotel where politicians and powerful business executives slept when they were in Hamburg. The rooms were big and luxurious.

I got a suite while the other models got normal rooms. That was a bit strange. The other models also noticed it, but did not say anything.

“I guess you´re a special booking,” one girl concluded.

That was the first time that I actually wondered about a special booking. A special booking was a term used by bookers if they had to book a model from abroad, for a job for a lot of money.

At that time I did not connect special bookings with mind controlled fashion models. I had my questions, but I kept my mouth shut. The room was so much better than the normal rooms.

The first days everything seemed normal. We took cabs in the morning to the big studios. Worked the whole day and were brought back to the hotel. No time to go shopping in Hamburg. We worked like slaves.

The fourth day, I woke up feeling strange. When I got up, I noticed that I was naked. That was very strange, because I never sleep naked. I always put on a nightie. I had a lovely collection of Laura Ashley nightgowns which I always wore when I was booked abroad.

When I got up, all of a sudden I felt fluid dripping between my legs, running down my legs. What a disgusting feeling! I touched the fluid and

smelled it. I almost puked; it was sperm. I went to the bathroom to put on a robe. When I opened the door, I saw to my shock, my nightgown laying on the floor. The moment I saw it, I felt myself getting sick. I asked myself what is happening here. How is this possible and who is doing this? I felt so gross that I made a bath and soaked my body in “Chanel Nr. 5” bath cream for hours .

I closed my eyes thinking about who, what, why? For one moment I thought that I had been sleepwalking. But since when did I start with sleepwalking? I shook my head and all of a sudden it flashed in front of me that I actually had been waking up a few times before in hotels without my nightgown on. But I had laughed about it always thinking that I took my nightgown off due to the heat.

All of a sudden I remember one of the moments where fluid had dripped out of my vagina but that I thought I must be getting my period or something. I froze, things that had happened in my childhood flashed in. I thought, no way, this can´t be true. I knew it was of no use of saying anything to anybody. But one thing I made sure of not to accept bookings into Hamburg any longer and to beware of my surroundings. This was the last booking I did in Hamburg. Whatever booking came from Hamburg I refused my entire career as a model.

When I came back to the Netherlands I told my bookers at “Euromodel” that I did not want to work for this client any longer. They did not understand, but had to accept my choice.

A few months went by and everything was normal I did not experience anything strange or shocking, I was working almost every day, was busy and had a lot of fun doing my work.

I had gotten a commercial for a huge clothing warehouse and we were entering the show season which I enjoyed the most, the fashion shows.

The young American

In the beginning of my modeling career I was based in Amsterdam. I did all the fashion shows in the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium. I know that the spreading of the news new fresh meat in town started in Amsterdam as well as the hunting of my flesh which really started in the Netherlands .

I was just 21 years old when one day I was booked for a jeans fashion show of a now very famous Dutch jeans brand. It was winter and the show was about showing the new summer collections to buyers. It was not open to normal public. The show was held at their own production company.

It was winter around November/December. There were more boys than girls and the show went normal. We had some fun, nothing special.

After the show we packed our bags and opened the door to leave the building and to our surprise we saw that it had been snowing heavily. Everything was covered in snow. It was a real mess outside. “What now?” was my reaction.

I had come from Spain that morning and went straight to the jeans fashion show for the fittings, hair, makeup and the show. I still had luggage with me and I was not in the mood to drag it with me through the snow. I had to take a cab and train back home to Leiden, the city I lived in at that time. (I was still living with my mother). I also had to work the next day in Germany.

“Don't worry, I can take your suitcase with me and you go home. You can pick it up in two days,” said Jeroen, one of the male models.

Lazy as I was, I accepted.

As said before, I had to go to Dusseldorf (Germany) the next day. The job took five days before I was back home and thus able to get my suitcase.

When I came back from Dusseldorf, I went first to the agency where I called Jeroen, telling him that I was back in Amsterdam. He picked me up at the agency and asked me if he could invite me for a drink and dinner. I told him that I do not drink alcohol, but I accepted a hot chocolate with whip cream in a nice little cafe. We talked a lot and I had fun .

Then he asked me, no rather he begged me, to have dinner with him. I fell for his invitation and we later went out to some nice Italian restaurant where I did not eat any food but tiramisu and stupidly I had a glass of red wine which I actually liked.

Then came the one moment to go home. “Jeroen it is time to bring me to the train station or else I will miss my last train to Leiden. I am not in the mood to miss my train. So let´s go.”

I noticed he tried to stall, which irritated me right away. I insisted and got up from the table. Jeroen had no choice then to follow me.

In the car I noticed after ten minutes driving that he was not driving towards Amsterdam Central Station.

“What are you doing, you are going the wrong way. I don't want to miss my train. It is the last train to Leiden.”

“Sorry, do not worry we have enough time. I am just bringing something to a friend. Do not worry, you will not miss the train, I swear.”

I looked to the side to his face and for one second I got the feeling that I could not trust him.

We arrived at the house of his friend. Jeroen went in and came out very quick. Then we drove to the Central Station. But, darn if not, I had just missed the last train going back home. I felt as if this was a setup.

But then, Jeroen acted like he was really surprised that we missed the train.

“Well, there is nothing we can do now. You can sleep at my house. I will bring you to the station in the morning, I promise.”

I agreed. It was past midnight and there were no more trains back home. I had no choice but to go with him to his house. The reason I also said “yes” that easy, was because I knew he had a huge sofa in his living room. So I did not have to sleep with him in his bed .

When we arrived to his house, Jeroen was very caring and polite. No weird action from his side. So my suspicion toward him faded away. He played nice and my anger resided. We had some tea and went to sleep.

The next day, I was still sleeping on the huge sofa, when the doorbell rang. Jeroen was surprised.

“Who is that, I don't expect anybody. Do you mind if I check?” he asked me.

“Yeah sure, go ahead, I said.”

Jeroen opened the window to look down. Meanwhile I got up from the sofa and walked towards the window, so I could look down as well. I saw a young boy standing there. I could not see his face. Only his dark brown long hair. Then I heard an American-English voice. “Can I come up?”

Jeroen asked me if it was okay if his friend came up for a second. “He is only coming to pick something up.”

“Yes fine. No problem.”

I went into the living room and sat down on the sofa.

When the door opened I heard the voice of Jeroen´s American friend. “Is she here?”

“Shhhhh or she hears you!”

Yep, my alarm bells went of. But before I could think what to do, Jeroen asked me if I wanted a tea. I accepted, because my mouth was very dry. I thought, I am going to have one cup of tea, get dressed and then leave.

Jeroen handed me a cup of tea. I took a sip, but cannot remember taking anymore sips of the tea. I completely passed out on the sofa. When I woke up, I noticed that I was laying on the floor on huge pillows. I felt something and saw Jeroen stroking my face and kissing me. I remember clearly how I felt grossed out and that I turned my head away from his face to look at my feet because I felt something there .

When I looked down at my legs I saw the American boy stroking my feet and legs. “She is perfectly build. Look at her skin, perfect,” I heard him say.

I looked straight into the eyes of the young American. I wanted to say something, but heard him say: “Hushss.” Then he snapped his fingers and I passed out once again.

When I woke up, I was sitting in between both men. They were drinking tea.

I looked at the American. His hair was dark, falling over his face. I noticed that he was an Arab-Asian mixture, not Caucasian. His eyes were dark brown; a little Asian. He also had a slight tan.

Jeroen interrupted the silence. “I am going to make some more tea.”

The American looked straight at me in a strange way.

“I want to see you again,” he said the moment Jeroen left the living room.

I know that it sounds very foolish; but I accepted his invitation. All at once I could not help myself being very intrigued by him.

I was not aware that the American also took part in the rape. At that moment in time, I only remembered that I had fallen victim to a drugs rape and that I blamed Jeroen for the rape. He grossed me out.

In those days Nathalie simply had no idea that she had been programmed. She didn't know that they had activated her Monarch mind control program, the day she all of a sudden became extremely interested in fashion.

Was the American testing Nathalie's program? When Jeroen left the room, he must have hypnotized her for just a short instant. He had full control of Nathalie. Among others he must have erased her memories of him being part of the rape.

I asked the American what his name was. He mentioned his name and all I remember is my reaction. "That is a strange name. I have never heard that name before. Are you American? "

"No my mother is European. We lived in Amsterdam for some time, but now we live in the United States. I am a lot in Amsterdam."

Jeroen voice came from the kitchen. "Hey what are you guys doing?"

"Nothing, don't you worry," the American jelled back.

He looked at me. "I will pick you up tomorrow?"

I got up. "It´s time for me to go home."

Jeroen heard me from the kitchen. "I'll bring you," he said.

Next I found myself with Jeroen in his car. During the car ride to Leiden, I was silent until Jeroen popped the question. "What did you guys talk about when I was in the kitchen?"

I looked at him. "Can´t remember."

"Really?"

I sneered at him. "What do you want? I remember that you trapped me and you drugged me to have sex with me. You should be so lucky that am not screaming rape. I can go to the police right now. Just shut up and never talk to me again. I never want to see you again. Please take me to the nearest train station. I have decided to take a train back home."

Jeroen seemed to be displeased by my reaction and was silent. He was clearly thinking what to say next.

“Okay, sorry but we did not hurt you. You are incredible gorgeous and your hard to approach. That is why we did it. Two best friends sharing a goddess.”

At that moment it became clear to me that the American had also taken part in the rape. I was shaken up. I felt terrible, dirty and used.

Jeroen dropped me off at New Vennep, one train stop before Leiden, my hometown. I got out and took my suitcase. And in fact never saw this freak again but in fashion magazines.

My mother was in the kitchen when I entered the house .

“So what have you been up to,” she asked.

I looked at her and saw that she had a huge smile on her face. That same moment I realized that she knew something about what had happen to me. Later that day, I sat on the sofa. My mother sat next to me. She looked at me. “So you had sex with two men. Did you like it?”

I was shocked. How in heavens name did she know? I looked at her face and all of a sudden I felt myself getting infuriated.

“How do you know? You don't know what I did yesterday. You have no idea.”

She just smiled. “I can guess. You did not come home yesterday.”

“Just because I did not come home yesterday night, does not mean that I had sex with two man. That is impossible to guess.”

I knew back then, right at that moment, that my mother had something to do with the horrible things I had to endure at the hand of others. I remember how I wanted to really hit her from the sofa.

My plan was to accept the invitation of the American. Have a little talk with him. Then I remembered that I had forgotten to give my address to him.

So it was a surprise that two days later, he came to pick me up with his car at the house of my mother. I asked him how he got my address.

“Jeroen gave it to me” he answered.

But that was not possible. I never gave my address to Jeroen. A bit strange I thought. But at the time, I did not think it was that important.

The moment I saw the American, I forgot to ask him about what had happened at Jeroen´s place. I strangely enough forgot that Jeroen had told me that the American also took part of the rape .

When the American picked me up we did not go anywhere. We only drove around a bit. We talked in his car the whole time. It turned out that he aspired to become an actor. His dream was Hollywood. Before he dropped me off at home, he grabbed my hands. “Come with me to Los Angeles.”

“To America? No thank you. I have my modeling career here in Europe. I stay here in Europe. I don't like Hollywood at all.”

“There is so much work for models in Los Angeles. I can take care of you, I know people who would get you jobs right away as a model. Please come with me.”

“I do not know you well enough. So, no thank you. I stay in Europe.”

Short after we had talked in his car, he sent me a postcard, telling me that he left for the United States. He had gotten some movie parts and a role in a TV series, a start for his career.

I can not anticipate things ahead, but with time he became a wellknown movie star. I will come back to him in more detail later.

A familiar voice

One day I went to an after party in a famous club in Amsterdam. I was with Michael and Gerard, two medical students who jobbed in between as models. They were also from “Euromodel”. We went to a club and I had fun with the two of them. We did not drink. We only danced and danced. The heat was going up in the club. At one point I noticed and actually felt that the boys were dancing too sexy. That was the moment I pushed the boys away. “Ok, time to stop. Too many are getting horny from seeing you dance like this.”

We stopped and went back to our table. I ordered an orange juice and took a few sips. Then all of a sudden everything started to turn around. I became hazy, like some bad LSD movie trip. I grabbed Micheal´s shoulder and told him blurry what was happening.

“Oh my God you have been drugged,” he screamed .

“Gerard they put a “micky” in her drink. We need to get her to a hospital.”

I had gone down. I could not move and could not open my eyes. However I heard and felt most everything. i heard voices and the sound of doors. I also noticed how Michael carried me out of the club.

I heard people talking. “What happened, she is so young.”

“Yep, they want her real bad,” one male voice said in American English.

Then they put me in a car and we went to a hospital. Here they checked me and asked the boys if I did drugs.

“No nothing. No alcohol and no drugs. She does not smoke. She doesn't even drink coffee or eat meat,” one of the boys answered.

My stomach was pumped out. They also gave me an injection and ten minutes later I was able to move and felt a whole lot better.

That day was like a big wake up call. I never went out in Amsterdam after that one night. In the strangest way, it felt like a dark welcome into one abnormal world, which is the fashion industry and better said especially the modeling world.

Something bothered me. That was the American-English male voice, saying: “Yep, they want her real bad.” I will come back to this issue later.

Milan

The next two months passed really quickly. I was working almost every day. At that time I knew one thing, it was time to make an effort of leaving the Netherlands. I decided to do my best to get an agency abroad and leave the Netherlands as soon as possible. I thought that this was the safest en best I could do. So I started to accept more jobs in Belgium and Germany.

I also focused on fashion shows. They were more fun and safer for me to do. In that one year I focused mainly on fashion shows. The weeks and months flew by and nothing strange happened. I started to feel safe. After each show season I took time off. I refused to do many photo shootings in the Netherlands and in other countries as well. I went my own way.

Then came that one day were I had a photo shooting with another female model. She was the girlfriend of a man who was the brother of a famous Dutch model, who had worked in New York. She also had another brother who was dating Pat Cleveland, an extremely famous catwalk model back in the 70s. From one came the other and before I knew it, I was in the car with them on my way to Milan.

It was in the summer of 1984 when I joined the Ricardo Guy agency. In spring 1985 I stayed in Milan.

I was 22 years and smart enough to stay away from model apartments. These buildings were a mess. They were filled with want to be models, who do everything for a lousy job in some editorial. In addition, these model apartments where always visited by men, scoring young models, who had no work and needed cash.

I refused editorial jobs because the better and more famous the fashion magazine, the less money you made. Agents always said that these were the so called prestige jobs, through which you would get high paid jobs.

I could care less if the job was prestigious or not. I regarded modeling as a job that enabled me to travel and flee the moment I was hunted. Yes, I had attitude, but I was extremely professional and good at my work. Back then I thought that this was the reason why I was booked so much.

Nathalie had no idea that among others, she was programmed, to become a fashion model. Nor did she know that many bookings came through those behind her mind control programming.

From the first day on stay in Milan the interest in my person was huge, especially that of the men. I was also put in the fashion division with Lanzotti, a small midget man with a huge mouth and a good eye for models. Lanzotti dubbed me Bionda right away. “I will make you famous,” he promised.

“Whatever, but you can't get me to go to the notorious parties,” I thought.

Three days later I was booked for a well paid shooting for the Vogue magazine with a very famous Italian photographer. It was for a bag campaign.

“Wow, my first job in Milan.” I was very enthusiastic.

The day I entered the studio of the photographer, I felt right away that something was fishy. On the long table were many leather bags from some designer positioned.

“Good you are here, we can start,” the photographer yelled.

A female stylist came to me and took me in a room. “Okay, get undressed.”

“Undressed as in underwear?” I asked.

“No silly, naked. Take your clothes off, also you undies.”

“Excuse me, what sort of a shooting is this?”

I knew one thing for sure; I was not going nude for nobody.

“You will be naked. We are going to check to see where you need makeup. For the shooting, you will be laying naked amongst the leather bags on a table,” she answered,

I looked at her. “No way!”

The photographer heard me. “Come here,” he yelled annoyed.

“Go take some,” he pointed towards a small table.

At the table I saw a stash of coke and some snorted lines.

“Hell no, if you think I do drugs, then you better find yourself another whore. I am leaving,” I told him.

I grabbed my back and left the studio. I went straight towards the agency to make my complaints.

At Ricardo Guy the reactions were mixed. All the bookers were staring at me. They asked themselves, how I could have said no to one of the most famous photographers and Italian Vogue.

“Good for you,” one of the bookers said.

“Remember her. She is able to say no to John Casablancas,” another booker asserted.

“This assignment for the designer in the Italian Vogue, was your absolute chance of becoming famous in Milan. Do you know how long many models have to wait before they get such a chance? You are just three days in Milan and you were booked with one of the most famous photographers in town,” my booker said.

At that same moment Lanzotti came in. “Okay, in any case she is better for the catwalk. Her attitude is what the catwalk needs,” he said.

So Lanzotti started to push me for the fashion shows. And that was exactly what I wanted.

I had many fashion show castings within the first two weeks and was put in option by many. However, after several weeks I got bored.

“If I don't get some bookings soon I will leave,” I told some models while I was sitting with them in a trendy meeting place for the fashion models in Milan.

They all looked at me surprised. “But you have fashion show options?” one of them said.

“Yes but that is not for now. It will take weeks before the shows start. Don´t forget, that an option is not a booking.”

“Well, things don´t work like that in Milan. You have to stay for months, if not longer, before you got a job,” another model stated.

“Really? I don't think so,” I responded.

My plan was to tell the agency that I was going to leave Milan. Two weeks on stay was more than enough in my opinion. On top of that, I had to pay for a lot of things myself .

One thing I always insisted on was paying for my own apartments and other costs. This way I never owed any agency anything.

This was one huge problem for young beginning models. Normally, when an agency asks a model to come on stay, the agency will pay for all the costs. That means that the model has to accept whatever job the booker gets the model in order to pay back the costs.

I know about many occasions, where models were forced to do nude, so they were able to pay back what they owed the agency.

My motto was never go hungry on stay. I always made sure that I paid for my own tickets and apartments if I went on stay to another country.

Because of my knowledge, I was on guard in Milan. I never went to one of the clubs in that city. I never accepted any invitations. This was one thing that bugged the agency. They kept telling me to go to these parties, so big famous photographers or important clients could see me. Instead of going to the parties, I sent them my comp business cards or my portfolio with photos.

Yet, fate took another route for me. When I entered the agency later that day, there was a casting going on for “Ellesse” bathing suits, with Monty Shadow, a very famous photographer.

“Hey who is this? Why haven't I seen her before?” Monty asked while he eyed me from the bottom to the top from left to right.

Lanzotti explained that I was new in Milan and that I was his new catwalk princess.

“I don't care,” Monty reacted. Then he lifted my skirt up to look at my legs and bottom. “I want her.”

By this I got my first one month long booking in Milan. I was booked for the island of Mauritius. It became a one month long job. Although it was a prestigious job for “Ellesse”, it was lousy paid, because I was new in town.

Mauritius

In the first week that I was in Mauritius, the Agency told me that after I did the castings in Milan, I had been booked for all the fashion shows. But that the agency had canceled all these shows in Milan, because the shooting for "Ellesse" was more important.

I remember how angry I was. My ambitions were direction catwalk. I wanted to be a model who only did fashion shows. And here was the freaking agent from Ricardo Guy who canceled the shows so I could do stupid bathing suits.

However, the "Ellesse" shooting in Mauritius became mighty interesting to me after all. One scandal after another!

Our crew on Mauritius consisted of three female models and two male models. They were all older than me. We had all been booked by Monty Shadow. We had one hairdresser, one makeup artist, one stylist, Monty Shadow, his assistant and the two supervisors of "Ellesse".

The hotel was the most expensive hotel in Mauritius. It was filled with young girls, makeup artists, hairdressers, agents, scouts, managers, agency owners, magazine editors, photographers and their assistants at the same time.

Two weeks after I had arrived in Mauritius, *The Face of the 80s* started. The event was organized by the previously mentioned John Casablancas from "Elite" models. It was a contest held for very young aspiring models, ages between thirteen and seventeen years. All fresh young pieces of meat for all those horny rich and elite men, who entered the Island at the same token. It was a huge event back then, as far as I know the first in its kind.

We had been on a shooting outside the dominion of the hotel. When we returned to the hotel it was like a beehive so busy. Everybody was running around due to the many guests having arrived and still coming in. At first it was just the fashion world people who settled in. The young girls were put in their rooms. They all got chaperones, to watch the behavior of the girls. The very young girls were not allowed to smoke cigarettes or to be outside

of their room after 10:00 PM. One group of girls was put on a diet. Another small group had to eat more.

Back in the 80s, many of the young models were just bones. However they had more meat on their bones than the heroine look that was created as of the late 90s.

I was called too skinny back in my days as a model. That size now would be regarded as to be big now.

One week after the girls arrived, the top models of that period came in. They would do a fashion show from Azadine Alaya. Five days after the top models arrived, the elite came in; including members of the house of Monaco.

The contest lasted for more than three weeks. It was a mix of everything and everybody hopping around like hysterical chickens screaming the names of models that had strayed off.

Everywhere around the hotel and on the dominion of the hotel they set up little studios. Shootings where going on everywhere at the hotel, on the beaches, including in hotel rooms. Mauritius had turned into a fashion paradise. However, the hotel at times felt like a huge whore house.

Meanwhile I was working for “Ellesse”. We were mostly on location and came back at the end of the day. Then Monty decided to use the hotel as well. The shootings were done at the swimming pool, and around the hotel, and also at the hotel´s private beach.

So all of a sudden, I became part of this mad beehive called *The Face of the 80s* hunters. Agency owners came to me asking me who I was and from which agency. Judge members promised to vote for me. They didn´t know that I was there due to a normal booking for bathing suits and sportswear for “Ellesse”. T o some I told that I was 22 years old. My age shocked them. They thought that I was only sixteen or seventeen years old.

One agency from Vienna did not back off. They wanted me to come to Vienna. I accepted their invitation and I took their card.

But soon, I forgot about them. Way to much work and photo shootings every day. The shootings differed from bathing suits to bikinis, to sportswear, to surf ware, including golf fashion. It was a diverse shooting.

My relation with Monty was strange, the other models behaved like slaves around him. I did not. From the beginning I had my mouth sharp.

When needed I was ready to tell him “no”.

Monty did not try to have sex with any of us. His ways differ very much from most photographers. But if something did not suit him or if he wanted something, then it did take place. One day he ordered to pull out some palm trees on the area of the hotel for one photo. He decided that the light was not good. So, all the palm trees were pulled out for just one photo.

During the day we were all models doing our work. At the end of the day it was required that we, the models would attend dinners.

I either did not show up or came too late; stayed for a short period of time and went back to my hotel room. Monty just looked at me, yet never said anything. He did not try to force me to stay. On the other hand, the other models were ordered to come and stay.

I liked to sit on the balcony. I could oversee the swimming pool area, the dance club area and one part of the dining area.

It was like watching television. Watching all the famous people. Many of them getting drunk, openly sniffing coke to the sex orgies at the swimming pool .

Certain girls, most of them, under the influence of cocaine, were chosen to spend the night with the famous and rich. Through the chaperones they could order the girl they liked. If one of the men wanted one of the girls, all they had to do was ask one of the chaperones. They arranged everything.

The girls who accepted to go with these men, actually thought that they would win the contest. These girls did everything to win and become famous.

One day we were shooting at the swimming pool. I had a bright green mini bikini on. I was posing in the waters, while lord knows how many people, especially males where looking. The shooting lasted five hours in the baking sun. After we were finished and I lifted myself out of the swimming pool, I wanted to take my bathrobe. I wanted to shield my body from all the eyes watching me.

All of a sudden I felt a hand grabbing my behind and a voice saying: “You are really, really beautiful. I want you.”

My instant reaction was that I turned around and slapped the man in his face. Everyone around us suddenly stopped talking. At once it was completely silent.

“No shit, she hit Johnny,” I heard one of the models saying.

The man I had slapped turned out to be none other than John Casablancas. He looked at me stroking his chin. “You will never work again anywhere, I make sure of that,” he said calmly.

I looked at him and laughed. “Really, you have power in the United States, not in Europe, duh!” Then I walked away leaving everybody behind with their thoughts and gossips.

Everybody was behaving like a slave around Casablancas. It seemed that only I did not like that man. Rumors about him and his appetite for very young girls were numerous .

Believe me, the way I saw him behaving around very young girls, confirmed the rumors. Not only Casablancas, but his entire male friend network were into very young models. I know for a fact that Casablancas slept with a thirteen years old starting model in Mauritius. It seems that his wife accepted his ways.

Days later I got into a heavy argument with Monty. We had been doing a surfer shooting in the blasting sun for a few hours, when I was put into one position curving my back into the surfboard stretching my body along the board. I looked up to the sun and bang I fainted. I fell hard to the ground.

I woke up hearing Monty screaming. “Sugar, we need sugar.”

Then they handed me a few sugarcanes. I ate a handful and got up again jumping around. “Don't worry I am fine.”

Later that night, when we had dinner, we were sitting together with the whole team. After dinner I took a cigarette (by that period in my modeling career I started to smoke cigarettes of and on) .

“Hell no, not after you fainted on us today,” Monty said. Then he grabbed the cigarette out of my hand.

“Really, I decide if I smoke, it is not up to you.” Then I grabbed a pack of cigarettes from one of the supervisors of “Ellesse”.

Monty took the pack out my hand. “No don’t.”

It was the supervisor who handed me one cigarette. Monty could not say anything any further.

“I can´t figure you out, either you are extremely naive or you are extremely dangerous,” Monty said.

“Time will tell,” I answered. Then I got up leaving the table to have a stroll on the beach. Ignoring that Monty was calling me back.

On the beach I was thinking about what he had said. What did he mean by “either naive or dangerous.” Why dangerous? It just didn´t make sense.

If I think about it now, then Monty must have known something about me and my programming. He surely had knowledge about fashion models being programmed.

What I saw in that one month was enough to understand what was going on in the fashion world. From that time on I stayed away from agencies like Casablancas “Elite models”.

The winner was picked beforehand

The contest at Mauritius was rigged. At one point there was a meeting with John Casablancas, the supervisors of the model agencies and some privileged members of the elite. They were selecting the winners hours before the contest had started. Not the models, but the countries the models came from. They knew that certain countries would buy the rights and air the contest on their TV screens, when one of their models would win. In the end, it was all about making money .

But, that time at Mauritius they were unlucky. The name of the winner leaked. Some of the girls heard who was going to win. They ran towards the tent where all the young new models where doing their makeup. They screamed that the contest was faked. That they already had picked out the girls that would win.

The girls who had slept with the rich and famous, who probably promised them they would win, started to realize that they had been lied to. They had slept with all these men for nothing.

All the girls started to rebel. They didn´t listen any longer to the chaperones. Panic among the organizers! They did not know what to do. Casablancas and friends were forced to keep a fair draw. But they did not. They made a lucky draw. Due to this, a completely different model won the contest. I believe that Fredericka van der Wall, a Dutch girl, won as well. Not because she was chosen, but due to lucky draws.

What I had seen in Mauritius was a enormous experience for me. Due to *The Face of the 80s* in Mauritius I realized that the business was one huge cattle call with many men preying on the virgin models.

If ever you decide to become a model, then you need someone you can trust. Someone, who does not deviate from your side. A smart girl enters the modeling world with her parents, a boyfriend or husband to protect her.

I was not that smart, I walked the miles being single. I thought I was smart, but I wasn´t. What I had seen in Mauritius was a huge warning and

wake up call for me. When I woke up, I realized with a shock, how stupid and naive I actually was.

It is important to mention, that not all bookers are vile pimps. There are agencies who are honest and do not pimp their models out. Unfortunately, this counts mostly for small unknown agencies.

Vienna

When I arrived from Mauritius in Milan, I went direct to my agency. All bookers looked at me a bit perplexed, after I entered.

“Nathalie, listen you are cute, but we cannot take you any longer. We have a girl like you. She is much lighter than you are. You are too dark for our clients,” my booker told me.

I was very surprised. “Excuse me? Do you know how come that I am that dark? I have been for more than one month in Mauritius doing bathing suit shootings at the beach. In was in the water and in the full blasting sun the whole day. What did you think that I would not tan?” I responded.

At that moment, the executive came to me. “Nathalie, I hope you understand, but for now you are way too dark for us. We will not be able to sell you. You have to go home and become lighter again. Then come back. We will wait for you to come back.”

I looked in a mirror and had to agree with them. I had become extremely dark, reddish dark in Mauritius. That was not my normal color.

“I understand that at this moment I am too dark. That also counts for the Dutch market. So I will take a holiday.”

Consequently, I returned to the Netherlands. I had made enough money to be able to live for a while, until my skin got back to my own color.

The days passed me by. After what I had seen in Milan and Mauritius, I asked myself many times if I should continue to work as a model. I was seriously thinking of quitting the modeling world.

Two months passed by when I was called by an agency from South Africa. They wanted to book me for a cover and editorial. At that same period news broadcasts in the Netherlands showed civil unrest in South Africa. So I refused the offer. I didn´t want that kind of sphere around me .

A few days after the call from South Africa, Monica, the supervisor of the Austrian model agency who invited me in Mauritius to come to Vienna, called me. I had completely forgotten about this invitation. Monica wanted me to come over to Austria. I told her that I needed to think about it.

It took me three days before I decided to agree to go to Vienna. The reason I agreed was very simple. I thought I was going to the land of “Heidi”, the land of the “Sound of Music”. I was convinced that going to Vienna would be safe for me. Vienna was an unknown scene in those days. Nobody talked about the fashion scene in Austria.

Monica did send out my set cards to various clients. When I arrived, she had already five bookings waiting for me.

Vienna was completely different from Amsterdam, Dusseldorf, Brussels or Milan. I will never forget when I walked in the centre of Vienna for the first time. The only colored face was my face. There were no colored or black people in the streets. The politeness of the Austrians, their etiquette was and still is brilliant. Their reactions were brilliant. They all loved my color. The compliments where raining down on me. Which woman would not feel flattered? I fell in love with Vienna the moment I arrived there.

There was only one problem I bumped into. The agency had set me up in a very small hotel room close to the agency.

The room even had a broken chair. When I saw the room I told the man at the lobby, to forget it. I refused to sleep in such room.

I went straight to the agency, barged in and said with a loud voice: “Who do you guys think I am? How dare you put me in such a cheap little hotel. Change the hotel right now or I will leave with the next plane.”

I really meant it. I had gotten used to hotel suits. Nobody was putting me in some cheap hotel, was my sentiment back then .

“Oh my God, we have a princess in the house,” was the reaction from one of the agents.

“You have to understand, that I don't like cheap hotels. Don't you ever dare booking me for less than what I demand,” I said to her.

Then I felt sorry. I had no idea why I behaved the way I did. Something had turned me into an authentic bitch by the time I arrived in Vienna. Every time when things were not accurate, I would bitch around. Like many other models, I refused bad service, bad food and bad hotels. At that time I thought that I had changed into the typical model bitch, because of my experiences in the modeling world. But that make no sense. To be honest, I was never treated badly. The opposite is true. Where ever I came, I was always treated like a real princess.

After making the scene at the agency about the bad hotel, I was put in luxurious hotel apartment. I worked almost every day for two months in a row. Nothing strange happened and I actually felt absolute safe in Vienna.

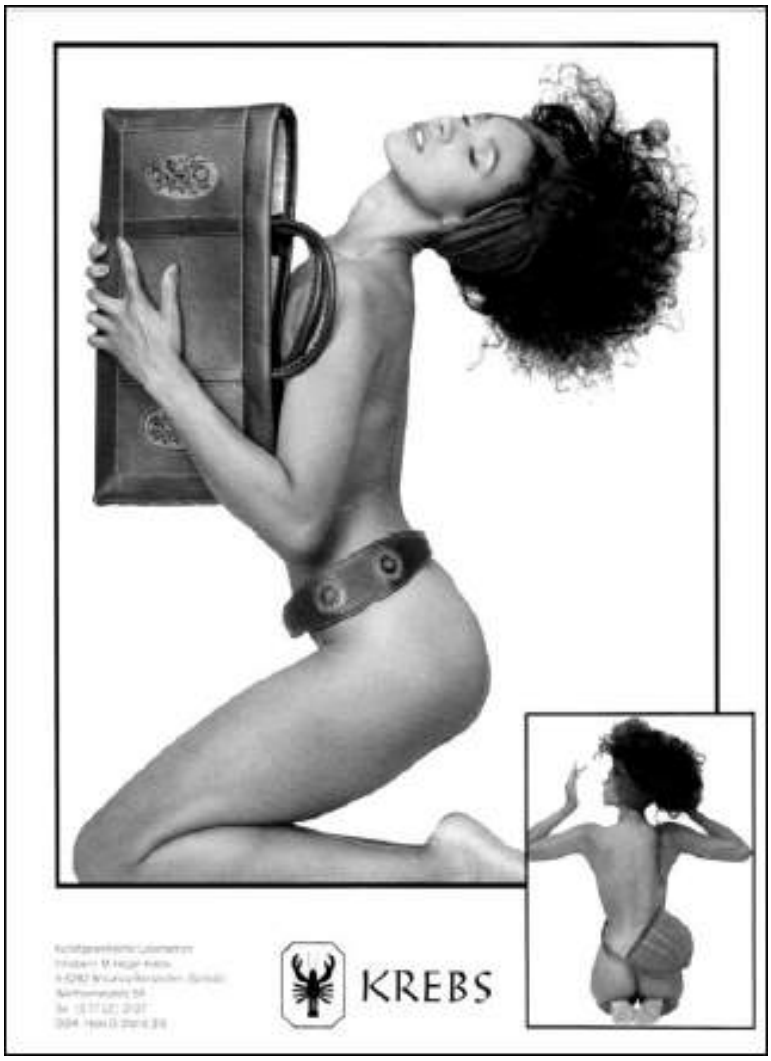
I had hooked up with a group of five American models. Among them there were two black male models and one black female model. I had met them on my second day in Vienna at the agency. Since that moment we worked close together. We did several photo shootings and shows together. We became a close group. At night we went out and had a lot of fun in the clubs. We were young and sometimes we did not behave properly. Believe me, at times we were just loud obnoxious models.

It was 1985 and I felt very secure in Vienna. I also had found an expensive model apartment. So, I decided that it was time to go to the Netherlands, pack my personal belongings and move to Vienna.

After I returned from the Netherlands I was asked for a nude photo series to promote fine art manufactured leather bags by “Krebs” .

At first I said no way. Then they explained to me exactly how the shooting would be. They promised that one would only see my naked back. My bottom would be partially covered with a leather bag.

They also told me how much the client paid for the campaign. I couldn´t refuse. But, this nudity shooting for "Krebs" was the only one I accepted in my entire career as a model.



During the shooting, Helmuth, a good friend of Monica came in. He was the CEO of one of the principal banks in Austria. Helmuth did not know that there was a shooting. He came to discuss some banking business.

After the shooting was done, we all sat on the terraces and I asked Monica if she knew about another apartment, because the one I was staying in was ridiculously expensive .

“Why not take my apartment? I am hardly there, it´s empty most of the times. It does not cost you a thing,” Helmuth asked.

I looked at him to figure out that kind of man he was. I was convinced that I could handle him in my sleep. Thus, I accepted.

The apartment was gorgeous. The entrance was beautiful art deco. Helmuth had told me the truth. The first three months I actually lived alone

in the apartment. He was not present until one day he called me.

“I am back in town. I will come to the apartment. Don´t worry, you will not notice that I´m there.”

Indeed in the beginning I did not notice him at all. He was nice, did not make any advances until one night. I came home from a shooting. He had his maid do my laundry and iron my clothes. I looked at my clothes on my bed, even my panties were ironed. I thought, a strange way to please me.

Helmuth stood there looking at me. “I want to show you something,” he said. Then he opened a drawer in his office and showed me a stack of set cards from different female models. He was so proud, while telling me that he was friends with all of these models. That he had sexual relations with all of them. That he also took good care of them. Then he told me that he was also very interested in me. He was very serious. So serious that he made me laugh.

“No thank you. Not now, nor ever. So you collect model girlfriends like playing pasha. Doesn´t that cost you a lot of money?”

He was rather disappointed. However he didn´t persist and left me alone.

In the following days I worked very hard. I would leave the apartment in the morning and come back at night.

Most of the time, Helmuth was not there. We hardly saw each other. Then one day he invited me to a party at a castle outside of Vienna. I said yes to the invitation, after he promised me that if I did not like it, he would make sure there would be transport back to Vienna for me.

We arrived by car. I was stunned by the gigantic castle. It was a vast estate with many nude Greek statues. Castles like this don´t exist in the Netherlands.

We parked the car, got out and walked up to the castle. At the same moment a car speeded up and parked close to us. A man with a huge plastic bag jumped out. The bag turned out to be filled with weed. At this moment I thought, beware. This party looks like it´s a drugs gathering.

The guests were all members of certain influential families and banking families. Many were standing or sitting outside when we arrived.

At the dinner I did not eat. The people tried to make me taste the food but I held foot. After diner the guest where spreading around in the castle.

I had to go to the bathroom. Everybody was gone, when I came back. It was as if the castle was abandoned. I decided to go to the library and take a look at the huge amount of antique books.

While in the library I heard voices from behind one of the wooden walls. Then I noticed a small door. I opened it and saw a corridor. At the end I saw light and a big room. When I entered the room, I saw a huge table with long coke lines and small coke mountains. Many of the guests were snorting from it with snorting pipes. I stood there and watched them for a few minutes. I felt grossed out.

Then all of a sudden I saw a highly pregnant female taking one of the snorting pipes bending to the table to snort some coke.

That was the moment I reacted. “Hey you, what are you doing? You are pregnant! Don´t you know that coke will damage your baby?” I yelled .

Everybody was silent. The woman shrugged her shoulders and snorted the coke anyway.

I was totally grossed out by those people and decided to go home. I saw Helmuth standing in the crowd. I shouted at him and demanded him to bring me home. He arranged a cab that brought me home. Helmuth himself stayed at the party for the night.

The next morning, I decided that the free of rent living days were over. I had more than enough money. It wouldn´t be difficult to find an apartment. A week later I met an Austrian model. His grandmother had died and he was looking to rent her apartment out.

I asked Bridget to share the apartment with me. She was an afro-american female model from New York. She had been working in Milan before she came to Vienna. She told me how she was scouted in Milan by the head of an agency for the fashion shows. But, she hardly worked in Milan.

“How did you make money then?” I asked.

She told me that she had hooked up with a rich man and a famous photographer. She made money, by scouting new girls for them for private parties. The photographer she mentioned turned out to be the photographer who wanted me to lay naked on a table between leather bags and wanted me to snore coke so I would loosen up.

“So, you were pimping these girls out?” I asked her.

She got angry and insisted that it had nothing to do with pimping these young girls out. “I never used force. The models decided themselves whether they agreed or not.”

I asked her a lot of questions about these parties. She did answer a few. Among others, she mentioned the party boats where they would invite very young models to. She admitted that the guests were always older politicians and famous actors .

When she told these things, she was talking as if it was a normal thing for her to gather girls and bring them to these parties.

Knowing this, I was aware of her behavior and promised myself never to go with her to private parties. But still, she was fun enough to become roomies with.

Bridget did not really look like a model. She was tall and very skinny. She had a straight body, no difference between waist and hips and no tits. For that reason, they liked her for the catwalks. In Austria, she was booked for many shows.

The Austrian fashion scene was not known for many models. In those days, for me, all doors flew open, including the doors in Munich and later in Zurich. Invitations came in more than I could handle. Many times, I had double bookings in one day. Early in the morning I worked for one client. Then later that day, mostly around 15.00 hours, I had a second chore. The same happened with the fashion shows. I would do photo shootings during the day, and in the evening a fashion show.

In the first six months in Vienna I had hardly time to rest. Around that period, I was so busy that I was not able to stand still or to think. I woke up early in the morning, going to the studios. I was like a robot during these six months. Sleep, work, eat, sleep work eat. That was the rhythm. Because no strange things happened, I felt totally safe in Vienna.

About two months after I had moved into the new apartment with Bridget, I met a painter called John and some people from “Vesna” design; a bunch of hippies making incredible printed silk fabrics.

I met them while I was sitting together with Bridget, Earl and Jeff, the two dark-skinned male models at a terrace at the Lugeck Platz, a small square in the 1st district of Vienna´s inner city.

The painter and his followers saw us, approached us and introduced themselves. In itself, this was not that strange .

A group of colored people in a white country like Austria attracted a lot of positive attention during that time.

After they had introduced themselves, we had a nice conversation.

The people from the “Vesna” group owned a whole building, including a courtyard in the Bakkerstrasse at the Lugeck Platz. They became very interested in booking me for a fashion shooting.

Because I liked them, I agreed.

The “Vesna” group and John were good friends. John was an extremely good painter. He travelled the world and had clients everywhere. Many of his clients came from Dubai and the Arab Emirates.

After two months, although he was 23 years older than me, I started a relationship with John. I liked him enough to react to his advances. He was a Scot, very tall, his grey hair was shoulder length and he had a beard. I actually like that kind of look.

My model friends, many times ended up at John´s place for a good dinner and talk. There was only one thing I really did not like. I didn´t like that he every day smoked hash. The first time I witnessed it, was when I came for an unexpected visit. He was laying on a table.

I asked him what was happening. He looked at me and smiled.

“It´s obvious you don't smoke,” he said.

He didn´t notice that at that moment I had a cigarette in my hand. “You are wrong. Don´t you see that I sit here with a cigarette?”

He laughed and got up. “Darling this is hash. You know what hash is, don't you?”

“Yes, they smoke it in the Netherlands, but I don't do drugs.

Afterwards at home, I told Bridget that John had a lot of hash. That he got it from Dubai and that it was supposed to be the best quality possible .

Bridget jumped from her chair. “What John has hash? Why not go and visit him tonight? Let´s go to him tonight.”

I was not surprised that she was a hash smoker.

That evening I watched Bridget smoking hash at John´s place. The hash changed her. She became a giggly, almost drunk sounding person. I did not like to see nor hear her behaving like that.

The relationship with John was rocky and strange. He was very much into meditating esoteric and numerology. His friends were all artists, many of them musicians and painters. They were very different from my friends.

The relationship with John lasted about 1,5 years. But we did not see each other much. In truth, we saw each other maybe about five or six months in total. This was because of the many bookings abroad I did.

During the period that I had a relationship with John I kept the apartment that I shared with Bridget. I refused to live with John in his house. It had nothing to do with John but everything with me. I didn´t want to come to John's house after a shooting or fashion show. His house was always filled with his friends smoking hash and playing music. John´s house was too smoky, especially the bedroom. I hate to sleep in a smoky room.

My first “jewel show”

I had many bookings in different countries. Sometimes I stayed away for weeks or even for months.

I got my first jewel show in Vienna. I have to admit that the show was gorgeous. It was beautifully styled and the choreography was well done. It was a classy event where the Austrian, Swiss and German uppermost families came together to watch the new jewels presented by the famous jewel makers, like Bvlgary, Cartier and De Beers .

This show was my introduction into the world of the topmost families like the Rothschilds and Rockefellers. I started to receive many invitations to come to their parties. Once I was even invited by a Russian prince. His house was filled with rare art and showed grandeur. It was over the top, at least in my eyes.

At the “Wiener Staatsoper”

Once a year, the “Wiener Staatsoper” (Vienna State Opera) building turns into the world’s most beautiful and elegant ball room for the Vienna Opera Ball. It is a glamorous gala of unique splendor and allure. The ball of all balls.

Members of Royal families, the super rich and influential families and famous movie stars, as well as politicians attend this event.

One time, I myself went to this gala with some other models. When I entered in my evening gown from “Lanvin”, I was introduced as if I was one of the elite members. The moment they called my name, an eccentric man came over to me. He invited me to his table. He was not interested in the other models. Once at the table, he and his friends invited me to join them for the after party.

At that moment I knew that is was time to leave for my own safety. I ordered a cab back home. And now it comes... I remember the cab, but do not remember coming home. What I do remember is that I woke up naked in my bed. My gown over the sofa, high heels on the floor and one huge bucket filled with roses, red roses on one of the tables.

Up to today, I do not know what happened that night. I had flashes of bizarre images. Contrary to what happened to me before in Hamburg, there was no fluid dripping between my legs and I also had no wounds. So it became easier to forget about it. I fooled myself by thinking that I probably had dreamed it. The question remains where the roses came from.

Julio Iglesias

When the show season (1986) started, I had to go to Munich. I represented some Austrian designers. I was the only model booked from Austria. The agency told me that it was a special booking.

I was booked in a very famous five star hotel for the rich elite and the famous as well for politicians. I was put up in a suit on the top floor, a few floors higher than the rooms of the other girls. They got normal rooms.

That first night, there was commotion in the hotel due to the presence of Julio Iglesias, the famous Spanish singer. He did some concerts in Munich and stayed at the same hotel. When I returned to the hotel from doing some fittings, I heard about him being a guest.

I was very tired and went to sleep. That night, it was pretty late, around midnight, I woke up. I could not sleep. So, I called service to bring me a glass of hot milk with honey.

The receptionist told me that there was no kitchen staff present, but that, if I wanted, I could make use of the kitchen, a special service for "hotel suite" guests. Before going downstairs, I opened the door to have a look at the floor. It was totally empty. I did not detect any life on the floor. Dressed in only a long shirt and barefoot, I went down the kitchen to make myself the hot milk. When I finished in the kitchen, I walked with the cup of milk towards my room.

Then, all of a sudden, I heard many voices. From around the corner a huge group of men came walking up to me. I was surprised and I stood still wandering what they wanted from me. Then one of the men stepped aside. Who did I see standing in the middle of all these men? It was Julio Iglesias. He looked very old, had a bad skin and was bald on top of his head .

I had to laugh. His fans know him with hair, but in fact he was bald. He stood in front of me and kept his hands together. Then he bowed slightly for me. "I am honored to see you. You are indeed very beautiful. I can´t wait."

I looked surprised at him. Who had told Julio Iglesias about me? And what did he mean by "I cannot wait"?

"I don´t think so. You do not believe that yourself?" I said.

Then I walked quickly to my room. Locked the door and did put a chair under the handle of the door. At that moment I was very convinced that I was safe; that by this nothing could happen to me. I was so wrong. After drinking the milk, I fell asleep right away. Then all of a sudden I woke up and noticed that I was laying on a bed. I was dressed in some black leather underwear set and my arms were tied up and locked to rings, just above the bed frame.

I saw an open door and a very young boy standing there, looking at me. The moment I wanted to say something it became black in front of my eyes. The next thing I know is that I woke up the next morning in my suite with my shirt on.

At first I thought that I had been dreaming. But, when I got up, going into the bathroom, pulling off my shirt to take a shower, I saw two small bruises on my legs and my wrists were sore. Yet, there were no marks to see. For one second an image of myself, being tied down on the bed, flashed in front of my eyes.

Then I thought, no way. This did not happen I must have been dreaming. Maybe I had my legs bruised during the fitting. Or maybe... Then the phone rang. “Nathalie, it´s time to come downstairs to do your hair and makeup.”

After I laid down the phone, I forgot about the incident. I took a shower, put my clothes on, grabbed my bag and went down.

Nathalie was programmed to obey, to do, to experience and afterwards to “forget” .

That same day, when I returned to the hotel from my work, I was waiting for the elevator. I had a pair of jeans and a t-shirt on. I was the only model who was casual dressed. I refused to dress up just because I was booked in this super hotel.

An old man addressed me. “Why do you dress like that?” he asked.

“Because it´s comfortable,” I answered.

“Comfortable is for when you´re home. It would fit you better if you would dress. You have beautiful long full hair. Why don't you wear your hair open.”

I thought, what is wrong with all these men? Why could they not leave me alone? I got in the elevator without responding.

I was glad when I left that hotel the next day. To me the hotel was too dangerous. Why did this hotel lend itself for fashion shows, was one of the question I had.

Back then Nathalie did not know that many hotels belong to a hidden network within the modeling industry and fashion world.

At the “Munich Fashion fair”

After I came back from Munich, I thought that maybe having a little dog with me, would block all those strange things from happening. Within a week I had bought a little dog. I called him Dzjengis Khan.

The same week I had to go again to Munich, I was booked for the “Munich Messe” (Fashion fair). I had to do the shows for the Austrian labels. Then, at the end of the day, I would do the designer shows.

During one of the shows, while I walked on the catwalk, I heard a familiar voice. “So how long will she be this time in Munich? ”

I looked in the direction of the voice. I was shocked. I looked straight into the face of the American who had drugged me in Amsterdam with Jeroen.

I was surprised, I had completely forgotten him. At first I wanted to react, but I was walking on stage. I could not stand still and address him.

Backstage, while getting in another outfit, my mind was racing. What was he doing here? I thought he was in the States. I tried to remember his name, but it was blocked in my brains. That was not that strange. Every time I wanted to remember his name it was blocked.

There was no time to think any longer. I had to go on stage again. I had the intention to have a good look at the American and the people who were with him.

As I was walking the catwalk, all of a sudden I became dizzy and fell unconscious. Later, the other models told me that at first the people thought it belonged to the act. Then they realized that it was serious.

I was brought to a doctor and he examined me. Then he stood up. “My God, she has a tube pregnancy, she blacked out because it´s ready to explode in her body,” I heard him say.

The lady who brought me to the doctor panicked.

The doctor was calling hospitals, but there was no one that could do the surgery right away. Fortunately, the doctor found one hospital in Munich Passing. While he was talking to the hospital, I was thinking about what he

said. How could I have a tube pregnancy? I had not have sex with John for months.

I asked the doctor how far the pregnancy was.

“About three months,” he stated.

I felt my heartbeat going up. This was impossible. My situation forced me to stop thinking about the cause of my pregnancy. I had my dog with me, so I first had a few things to do. I insisted on being brought back to the fair. When I returned, the models were happy and thought that I was okay.

“No, no... she is very ill. It is very serious. She has to go into surgery immediately,” screamed the lady who had brought me to the doctor.

I parked my dog with Bridget. Then I left in a taxi with two escorting police motorbikes, without stopping for traffic lights, straight to the hospital.

When they wheeled me into the surgery room I was afraid. “I can´t have this. I cannot have a scar. I am a bathing suit and underwear model, I said to the doctor”

The doctor laughed. “Don't worry. It will be a very little scar.”

He was right. The scar indeed was very small and it was only five centimeter below my pubic hairline. Just German doctors are truly the best. After the surgery I was moved to a private hospital room.

During the five days I had to stay at the hospital, I had forgotten about seeing the American during the fashion show.

After five days I went back to Vienna by train with a friend. In order for me not to damage my belly muscles, I wasn't allowed to go home by plane. I got three joints for the ride from a doctor. He insisted me to smoke one each hour. I was totally surprised. At that time I did not know the real deal when it comes to hash or weed.

Then the doctor explained that he used weed as a medicine. I remember well how my friend went totally paranoia, when I lit the first joint in the train.

“Don´t worry.” Then I showed him the doctor's recipe.

“Is it used as a medicine? I did not know that,” he said.

You cannot buy this nigger

When I came back to Vienna, John was a perfect nurse for me. He took good care of me. I allowed myself to be sick for only one week. Friends where around and walked the dog for me.

One week later, regardless that I had just gotten out of the hospital, I was booked for a short fashion film. That assignment paid a lot of money, higher wages than usually for this kind of films.

Up to the present day I still don't know who the clients where. It was in a far off location. The taxi that brought me, did cost a lot of money (paid by the clients). When I arrived, I saw a colossal white mansion with an immense driveway and a garden that looked like a park.

When I entered the entrance, a woman came to me.

”You, you have to dress here,” she commanded, while she pointed to one room which was pretty empty.

When she walked through the empty room, I followed her. Then we entered another room where the models were dressed. There were a lot of little blond children models. “No this is not for you. This is the wrong room,” said the women.

“Excuse me. I am also booked for this film as a model. Where are my clothes?”

A young man came in and handed me an apron and a black slave dress. I looked at the whole scene and I saw that they were dressed in colonial style and that all where blond models. I asked them what the scene was. “You are the black nanny of the children.”

“Are you freaking crazy? Do you think that you can book me to play nigger for your ass. Who do you people think you are?”

I threw the clothes on the floor went to the other room and called the agency. I asked for Monica. I cursed her to high heaven straight into hell .

The woman had followed me. “You can't leave. We have paid a lot of money for you.”

“Do you think that you can buy this nigger,” I sneered at her. Then, I demanded her to order a cab. “Be advised, that if you don't order a cab, you will deal with my lawyer.”

The cab was ordered and I drove straight to the agency. I barged into Monica her office.

“Bitch if you ever dare to sell me again as a slave, I´ll bring your agency down. I swear, I make all the models leave you for another agency,” I let her know.

Monica sat still and did not say anything. She let me curse her out before she dared to speak. “I did not know. They told me that the film was for a commercial. They asked especially for you. You know I am not a racist. I have five black models in Vienna.”

“Sure... Tell me one thing. Why do you have Jeff and Earl? Jeff did a few shows but Earl never worked. So what is up, with that? Where do you need these black male models for in Vienna? They suffer from jungle fever in this city.”

I wanted to know who the client was. Monica did not answer. Later the film turned out to be some family gathering. It was one of Austrian’s top families who had booked me to play servant in their family film.

I told Monica that I needed to think about her and the agency. I needed to think if I wanted to stay with her or not. The same evening I decided to leave.

To cut a long story short, I switched from Monica´s agency to “Wilhelmina Wien”, an important agency well known in the States. I brought all my clients with me.

One week later I was booked for a swimsuit trip at the island of Mallorca (Spain).

I first went to the doctor for a checkup for the scar on my belly. It was still a bit swollen from the surgery. But I was allowed to go to Mallorca. The shootings were for a bathing suit catalog in the style of the Pirelli calendar. Exact the same style. I never saw the catalogue and still have no idea who the clients were. The booking was not through Vienna but again from Munich. The trip to Mallorca lasted seven days.

MOLISE

Tokyo (1989)

When I returned to Vienna, I heard that a client wanted me to come over to Tokyo for the “Tokyo collections”. Within a month I was in Tokyo. Bridget accompanied me. She had been to Tokyo before me.

I did the castings and was booked right away. Every client wanted me for their show. I did many shows and made a hell of lot of money.

One of the shows I did was for Dior at Walt Disney Tokyo. It was opened with grandeur. Most guests came from abroad. Amongst them there were many movie stars and movie directors. I wondered why they would come to Tokyo for a fashion show in a children's park attraction.

The fittings for Dior went smooth. Then it was time for hair and makeup. Again everything was done perfectly, everybody behaved correctly. Nothing strange happened; I felt no danger.

The catwalk was much bigger than the show for Issey Miyake I had done two days before. The models that were booked were all the top catwalk models of 1987.

The moment the show started I felt a strange tension coming from a certain group sitting at the front row in the audience. When I passed them by I heard a woman´s voice. “Wow, you´re right, she is really beautiful. Do you think she will come with us?”

From the corner of my eyes I saw that it was Catherine Deneuve one of the best French movie stars, who had spoken. She was sitting with two men next to an older man. They were all staring at me. I stood still posed as if it was part of the show, glanced at all of them, turned around and kept walking. From that moment on I was cautious. I thought, whatever happens after the show, I go home.

When the show was over, I rushed back to my rack and got dressed quickly. While I put was putting on my jeans and boots, the doors of the dressing room opened. The older man, together with the two other men, who had been sitting next to Catherine Deneuve, came in. In French the older man asked one of the models if I was there.

MODELMANAGEMENT
FLAIR

talents
USA

I hid e myself behind one of the models. I saw that one of the men who entered with the older man, had dark black hair. He was the image of the American who had drugged me for six years.

Too many coincidences for me, I turned around, grabbed my back and ran to the exit. But, before I could leave the building, a man grabbed my arm and said. “No, don't leave, you have to stay here. ”

I stood still and looked at his hand grabbing my arm. “Your hand, please let go of my arm.”

At once he let go. “You can't leave you have been requested,” he whispered.

“Excuse me, requested? By whom?“

“You are requested by our special guest from France.”

“Do I look stupid? I do know what these requests mean. Do you think that I will let them drug me to have sex with me? I don't think so.” Then I marched out of the building, straight into a cab back to the apartment I had rented.

I have to be honest, due to my feelings being hunted and due to the many weird things happening around me, I also must have been many times bitchy to those who meant well. But as I did not trust any, I simply bitched at all who approached me.

When I opened the door of my apartment, I heard voices. When I entered, I saw John lay on my bed like a pasha.

“What are you doing here? I asked surprised.

John had decided to surprise me. He wanted to pick me up and take me with him to Bali to buy silk.

I was happy. John came at the right time. I thought that, if whoever wanted me that bad, would even follow me into Tokyo, that it was best for me to leave Tokyo.

The next day we left for Bali. At Bali I was not amused. John needed to be at certain places to do business. Most of the time, he left me at the beach on my own. I am not a beach puss, so I got bored real quick.

I also got into fights with the nasty men roaming the beaches and the hotel resorts, trying to sell drugs or young children for sex. I remember one day, after I told them to leave me alone with their drugs, that one of them asked me if I wanted to have sex with a young girl.

“A young girl! No! Go away and leave me alone!” I screamed .

He left, but thought he could convince me to have sex with one of the children. A few minutes later he came back with a little boy of about eight years old, trying to sell this child to me. I got up and was taller than the man. I lashed out at him hitting him to the ground. To the child I said to run away. The man got up and I hovered above him, screaming at him. He backed off and turned away running, cursing me like hell.

Later that night in the hotel I told John what happened on the beach. That I wanted to leave and that I refused to wait for him while he was doing business. Nor did I want to go with him to his appointments. I gave him two days to handle his business. The third day we went back to Vienna.

It was the period where I became a bit tougher in my attitude towards people. I was nice, lest somebody bugged me.

Back in Vienna a designer friend who worked for “Vesna” was busy preparing a new fashion show. I dived in and helped with everything. I threw out the bulk of the clothes insisting there were too many pieces for a thirty minutes show. I arranged the music, directed the building of the stage and booked good models for him. I also did the choreography. I worked three days without sleeping.

The show was at night and it became a huge success. The event was packed and people had to be refused for the show because it was that packed.

I discovered that I had a sixth sense when it came to doing styling jobs or choreography. It also gave me a different position then just being a model. I liked to be on the other side of the fence, not the model but the choreographer.

Monaco

Two months later it was again time for the show season. I had fashion shows in Dusseldorf and Munich. But before I went to Germany, I was booked for a “Dior” fashion show in Monaco. I was supposed to go first to Paris for the fittings. Then I had to go to Monaco on stay for five days .

My agent was exited, when the bookings came in. “Now you are going to become a famous top model.”

“Five days for one Dior show in Monaco? Do I look stupid to you guys? I am not going to Paris for fittings nor will I go to Monaco. These freaks from the house of Grimaldi are always at these shows to pick out models and to lure them to a party. They drug the girls to get them into their bed. Hell no, I am not going to Monaco. Tell the people from Dior that they can kiss my ass.”

Later I heard that Karen Mulder, a Dutch model, was booked for the same Dior show in Monaco. She had a beautiful classic face and worked extremely well. When the models told me that Karen was booked for that show, I send out a warning to her about the many threats. She didn´t listen and went to Monaco anyway. Like many others, she felt special, due to being invited in the “tax paradise” of the elite.

Monaco is a little kingdom that is shielded away from the eyes of the world press. Hardly anybody knows what really goes on in that small kingdom. Due to my meeting with the Grimaldi family while I was in Mauritius for “Ellesse”, I knew that the elite drug models for sex, especially Grimaldi´s son and his friends.

At that time, Nathalie was still not aware of the existence of the programmed Beta slaves.

Sexual abuse and missing models

After I refused the Dior show in Monaco, I went to Germany to do my shows in Dusseldorf and Munich. In Munich something happened that made me realize that I was not the only model being sexually abused.

When I arrived in Munich the first thing we, the models, had to do was go to the “Messe” (fair) for the fittings for the shows. These fitting days, together with the rehearsal days could take up to five days. And then you had the fashion show days. They lasted five days as well.

On the 3th day, when we were doing the rehearsals, one of the female models did not show up. The choreographer asked us if we knew where she was. Nobody knew.

One model remembered that the missing model had been invited to a party. The next day the girl was still missing. On the 6th day, all of a sudden she appeared back in the hotel. The girl had no idea what had happened to her. She said that she did not remember anything from the moment she got into a limo that would take her to the party. She was very upset. When I stood behind her, I saw marks in her neck. I said something about the marks. The girl got up to look at the marks in the mirror. Saw the marks in her neck and started to cry.

When she heard that she didn´t show up for three days, she got a total nervous breakdown. “Three days? How is this possible,” she cried. She could not cope with not knowing what had happened to her those days.

The bad thing for her was that the choreographer did not believe her story. He fired her and she had to go back home.

After the rehearsals we went back to the hotel. The girl was still there and I really wanted to talk to her. She was sitting at the bar.

I asked her if she could remember if this sort of thing happened to her before. She told me that she had experienced the same one time before. Like this time, she could not remember anything. Only that she woke up in the morning in her bed naked.

Demetrius, one of the models I hang out with in Vienna at times, also disappeared. This was again in Munich. We we're booked for several shows

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During the rehearsal days she was introduced to members of a famous rock group. The next day she did not show up for work. She was nowhere to be found.

The other models were worried about her. In my mind it just went “click”.

Demetrius disappeared on a Tuesday. She was gone for two days. On Friday she walked up to the stage where we were, she greeted us as if nothing happened.

The choreographer was very irritated. “How dare you to show up. Where have you been?” he screamed.

Demetrius did not get it at all. She looked totally confused. The other models explained to her that she had been gone for a few days. She had no recollection of it at all. She did not know that she had been gone for two days. When she woke up in her bed in the hotel, she did not know that it was Friday. She thought I was Wednesday.

These stories confirmed to me, that these things not just happened to me, but to other girls as well. Sometimes models did not show up for shows and nobody knew where they were. Other girls disappeared for several days without remembering where they had been.

It was very disturbing that the agencies must have known, but never talked about the girls who disappeared. As if such things did not happen.

The break up

After the show season in Germany, I went back to Vienna. Something told me that I had to move. Living independently would be better for me. My plan was to get my own apartment. I had enough of sharing an apartment with Bridget. Her behavior irritated me. She was too much into partying. She also liked drugs too much. I did not want to live with her any longer .

I found a new apartment soon. All I needed to pack were my clothes and beauty products. Before I moved in, I went to a secondhand store and bought the furniture. I bought four mattresses at “Ikea”. I stacked them up, making one huge soft bed. I felt relieved when I moved to the new apartment. Finally, I lived on my own. I felt that it was exactly what I needed.

All of a sudden, I was not only done living with Bridget, but I was also done being in a relationship with John.

I told him to get a new girlfriend. But he did not want to give me up. “If you need a younger boyfriend take one, I don't mind,” he told me.

“Yeah sure. You old hippie. I don't think that way. I do not sleep with more than one man at the time. This week I have some shows in Budapest (Hungary) and Prague (Czech Republic). We’ll talk about it, when I am back.”

When I returned from Prague, I decided that it was time for a change. I broke up with John, telling him that it was time to move on. I explained to him that I wanted to be single again. He was extremely sad and I felt very sorry for him.

The Egyptian Trip

One day, after John and I broke up, he called me. He wanted to see me. “Sure, why not. See you later,” I said.

When John arrived, he sat down on the huge old chair I had bought secondhand. I had my bathrobe on. At that moment I was total into a beauty trip doing my nails, taking hair and facial mask. I had a grooming day.

John asked me if I minded him to smoke a joint. I had no objection. We weren't dating any longer so it was no longer my business.

I was sitting on my bed drying my nails when all of a sudden, to my own surprise, I hear myself saying: “You know what, time for me to smoke a joint. ”

I got up, walked up to him and took the joint out of his hand and started to smoke.

“Wow, missy watch out, this hash will hit you within a few seconds,” he said.

But it was too late. All of a sudden I was in old Egypt. I was standing talking to a few priests. The conversation was about an enemy that was trying to take over Egypt. I was in command so it seemed. I pointed to a huge group of women, children and older men, telling them which direction to flee.

In between I actually woke up seeing John sitting on the chair looking at me. When he noticed I was back, he asked me what I was seeing. I pointed towards the door.

“Many people in Egypt. There is a war. A foreign enemy force entered Egypt. The people are fleeing.”

John was wordless. “Nathalie, do you realize that you speak Arab?” he asked.

John knew Arab. He had toured the deserts with an Arab dessert tribe for three years, before he came to Vienna.

I turned around to look at John and off I went again. At one point I must have fallen asleep. The next day, when I woke up John had left. I got up feeling completely normal. Yet the moment I got up from bed I felt a strange energy inside of me.

I took a bath, got dressed and called John. He was in the studios. I really wanted to talk to him about what had happened. When I entered the studio, John looked at me with strange eyes.

“Are you ok?”he asked.

“I feel fine. Please tell me, is it normal that you go on a trip, when you smoke your first joint?”

“Yes, but not the way you did. It was like Isis awakening in front of me. You not only spoke Arab, the way you moved last night was amazing. You danced like a snake. Your moves were as agile, as a snake. I have never seen any woman dance like that. You are a great dancer. Did you know that?”

I had to laugh. “Yes I know I can dance. As a little child when I was in the convent orphanage they discovered that I was a born ballet dancer.”

John looked at me. “Does the name YSE mean anything to you?”

“Why you ask?”

“Last night, during your trip, you told me that YSE was you real name.”

“To be frank, the name sounds familiar to me.”

All of a sudden I felt strange. I told John that I had an appointment and left. On my way out, John called me by the name YSE. For one moment I stood still. I noticed that I reacted very strong to that name, as if it was my real name.

From the Egyptian trip I remember everything up to today. I had and have full memory I never forgot anything about my Egyptian trip.

Zurich

After the shows in Budapest and Hungary I was booked for the first time for a jewelry show in Switzerland. The booking was in Zurich. Together with a bunch of other models from Vienna, I had to present the latest collections of the most famous jewel houses. This booking was a standard one for the elite audience and buyers.

Bridget, Demetrius and another girl from the United States were booked as well. We were all booked in the same hotel. I actually had to share a room with one of the models which I really hated.

The show went well, no strange things and no men bugging me. At the end of the show, we were invited for a private party. All models were pleased and accepted the invitation; I refused because of my bad experiences. I told them that I didn´t want to be drugged and sexually abused. “Don't trust these men,” I said to the girls.

The next morning Demetrius woke me up. “Wake up, bitch,” she screamed.

“Wow, what is wrong Demetrius?”

“Don't you know? Yesterday night we saw you. You were dressed in an evening dress sitting in a limo passing us by. We called your name, but you turned your head away. Who do you think you are? Are you better than us?”

Bridget came in. “Yep, we saw you. Why did you not greet us? Where were you going to?”

I stood up totally confused. “You are so wrong. Which evening dress did I wear? Do you see the dress here somewhere? I went to bed early. I did not leave the hotel room at all. Leave right away. I need to take a shower,” I screamed at them.

I was convinced that I did not go anywhere. The only memory I had was staying in the hotel and going to bed early. So, how in heavens name could they have seen me in a limo? I was convinced that the girls where wrong about seeing me. I had no evening gown or a cocktail dress with me. Nor did I have high heels with me. The girls must be mistaken. Probably they had seen somebody else that looked like me.

Yet, I felt a bit strange. Then I got confused. I could not remember entering my hotel room after I came back from the show. I could not remember a darn thing.

Another curious issue was the fact that the model I disliked and shared the room with, had not returned to the hotel. Some weeks later I heard that she was drugged and raped at a party. The case was handled in silence by the clients.

Fashion show tour through Spain

One week later I was booked to go to Madrid. After the normal shows, I was booked for a fashion show tour through Spain and Catalonia. I was booked by the famous Spanish high class fashion house “Loewe”.

Spain was the only country where I really felt safe. No weird things happened and no men were hunting me. I drank red wine and danced the nights away. I became careless. I had a great time. We worked every day and went out every night.

I got hooked up with a German model called Nicolas. We hung out in a group and we did many shows together. All homosexuals were talking about him. They insisted that he was officially a homosexual as they could tell.

“I know, but he is not out of the closet yet. That is why he hides in a relationship with females,” I explained to them.

In Spain I started to flirt with men. All of a sudden I behaved like a woman seducing men. I discovered how easy men where. It was so easy for me to seduce a man. I did not sleep with any.

I just liked the game, the hunt and the moment the man was like a puppy in my hands. Then I told them: “Okay, till here and no further. Have a nice day.” My friends accused me of playing mind games with these men.

When I came back to Vienna my friends noticed that I had changed.

“At once you behave like we all do,” Bridget laughed.

After Spain, for a short period of time, I was not on guard. I went to Paris for underwear shopping and took short holiday trips to friends abroad.

Then Nicolas decided to come to Vienna. He had no place to stay, so I let him move in with me. I introduced him to the right agency and he could start to work at once. He was the new male piece of meat in town, with an extremely muscular body .

Nicolas was extremely good with my little dog Dzengi. So at times I would leave my dog with him, when I had bookings abroad.

Pregnant

One day I noticed that my breasts were bigger than normal. I had not had my period for months. However, I was not worried, because I had no sex for a very long time.

Due to my breasts getting bigger and bigger, I decided to go to a doctor. He concluded that I was almost four months pregnant.

Big was my shock. “That is impossible. I did not have sex with anybody for a very long time,” I said to the doctor.

He decided to do another test and I really was pregnant.

Back home I received an intense mental scenario of sexual images. One image repeated itself. I saw a man pulling me inside a room. Then he kissed me and ripped my coat off.

I tried to remember. Were these dreams? If they were dreams, then why did they seem so real? I had no explanation for my pregnancy. One thing was for sure, I was pregnant and must have been raped.

I knew one thing. I did not want a baby from a rapist. For an abortion, I had to go to the Netherlands. Since 1980, abortion is permitted in the Netherlands up to and including the 23rd week of pregnancy. I called the abortion clinic in Leiden, the hometown of my mother. Made an appointment and booked a flight to Amsterdam.

The following morning I was on the operation table. The procedure was handled with care; no after bleeding, nothing.

I went out for shopping and back to the airport that same day. I do understand, that one will say, that it was a cold reaction of mine. But, I did not have sex with anyone. Yet I was pregnant. This was proof that something happened with me, something of which I had no idea what it was. That somebody had sex with me was obvious. I believed that keeping a child from a rapist is really not the wisest thing for me to do.

In the plane back to Vienna, again I thought about how I might have become pregnant. Had I been drugged? Or was it maybe hypnosis? This was the first time I thought about hypnotism. Then, out of the blue a

beeping sound came to the surface. At that moment I realized that all the strange things that happened to me had something to do with the phone in the hotel room. Was it possible that they had hypnotized me through the phone?

Slave handlers not only make use of the telephone, but also of answering machines, to send a special code to activate a Beta slave.

Second stay in Tokyo

One day when I came to the agency, Japanese ‘scouters’ were checking out if there were any models that wanted to come to Japan. Due to the huge paychecks, I accepted a second stay in Tokyo. Bridget was asked to come to Tokyo as well. So we went together. This time we did not share an apartment. I chose an apartment for myself, regardless of the cost being much higher.

I was booked almost every day. I did all major Japanese designer shows, like Issey Miyake Kenzo and Comme De Garcon. In between the shows I did one hair campaign, one fashion add and a huge billboard.

Pia a famous Swedish model was in Tokyo as well. She was an older model who looked like Marlene Dietrich. She was a special booking, but she hardly worked. She had been working since the 70s and was getting a bit too old for the business. I suppose she needed to make money in different ways.

One day she invited me for a dinner with some important Japanese men. I was curious as to what she was really doing in Tokyo, so I accepted the invitation .

The dinner was in an expensive fish restaurant. The Japanese men had booked the whole restaurant. Pia had scored twenty female models for this dinner. When we arrived in the restaurant I noticed how the staff was bending their knees for the guests. The men turned out to be members of the Japanese mafia, the Yakuza.

Most of the models invited by Pia showed bad behavior. When it was time to order drinks, they screamed for champagne. I refused the champagne and asked for mineral water. I knew one thing. Even that the men were really nice and polite, there was a reason why they used Pia to scout girls for them. Sex was obvious their intention. When it was time for dinner, the leader of the group told the models that they could order whatever they liked. They all did order the most expensive dishes on the menu. I was not hungry and declined the food on the menu. I also did not

trust the generosity of these Yakuza men. The leader tried to find out what I liked.

“Do you maybe prefer sweet things?” he asked me.

“Accepted, I always like a good dessert.” I answered.

Within a second, a tray, filled with all sorts of desserts was brought in. When some girls wanted to take one, the leader stopped them.

“No, don't touch them. They are for Nathalie only.”

At that same moment Pia looked at me in a very strange way. I told myself to be careful and be on guard.

And sure enough, two days later I woke up naked in my bed totally paralyzed. I could not move a muscle.

At that moment Bridget knocked at the door. For some unknown reason the door was unlocked. Although I was paralyzed, I could talk. “I can´t move, please call a doctor,” was the only thing I could say.

Bridget thought that I was joking. “Get up. Today you have the show for Issey Miyake, remember? ”

“You must be mistaken. Yesterday I went to that dinner party with Pia. The show is not today, but tomorrow.”

Bridget explained that I went to the dinner party two days ago. “Yesterday I couldn´t find you. You were not at home.”

I felt terrible. Like many other models, this time it was me who had disappeared.

“Please call a doctor now. I feel very bad,” I whispered.

The doctor sent me immediately to a hospital. It was weird, but the paralysis was over at the time we arrived at the hospital. I could stand normal, walk and I felt fine. In the hospital they put me twenty minutes on an oxygen machine. Then the doctor released me. “Everything is in order now. You can go home.”

My head felt strange. What happened? I could not remember a darn thing.

I was not able to do the show for Issey Miyake. I was completely fed up. After I arrived in the apartment I called the airport and changed the date of my return ticket to Vienna for the next day.

Then I called the agency. I told them about the dinner with the Yakuza two days before and that I could not stay in Tokyo any longer. The agents did not say anything. “We understand,” was all they said.

I left Tokyo and never returned to that country. I refused every contract that was offered to me by the Japanese agencies afterwards.

I found out that many models are scouted for Tokyo. Not to work as a model, but to play girlfriend for the elite in Japan. There are whole apartment blocks filled with these models. They entered Tokyo to work as a fashion model, but landed as a whore or to dance in one of the many private nightclubs. I was saved by the bell, so to speak.

Palace Augsburg

After I returned from Tokyo, I was booked for a jewel show at the Palace Augsburg (Germany) where they held a special jewelry show for a small number of important clients. They paid a lot of money to get me. It was held at end of November and it was snowing outside.

I had to do one scene, dressed in a black stretchy bodysuit covered in jewels, while holding a “boa constrictor”. The idea was for me, to come up on stage, standing on a special podium that gave light from below.

Because too much heat would upset the “boa”, they tested the strength and heat of the lamps. “The heat needs to be held down,” the owner of the snake claimed.

During the rehearsal everything went fine. But what happened during the show still angers me.

While standing on the stage, holding the snake, I saw a small group of special guests. They looked like they were obsessed by me. Then all of a sudden, all lights went on. Also the lights from below; the ones below my feet. In seconds the heat went up. The snake reacted immediately and started to strangulate me. Thereupon, I walked straight backstage, kicked a door open, went outside and rolled myself in the snow. I knew that a boa was a cold blooded animal. Above a certain temperature they need to cool down. After the body of the snake was cooled down, he released his grip on my body.

The owner of the snake was completely confused by the accident. “This has never happened before. I am so sorry,” he said.

I told him that it was not his fault, nor that of the snake. The snake just reacted to the heat.

Then I looked at the choreographer, who had not said anything yet. “Maybe you can tell me what went wrong,” I screamed at him .

“I don't know, we don't know.”

At that moment, I knew that it was not an accident, that it was staged on purpose.

Later one of the assistants told me in secret, that it was one of the special guests who had ordered to put all the lights on. He told me that the light technician first refused. But that he was threatened and that he received some extra cash to do so.

The special guest turned out to be one of those who had looked at me so obsessed at the beginning of the show. After the snake incident they had left the palace immediately.

I had no idea why these people did what they did.

Nathalie has not only been used by the Fashion industry, but also by several other organizations in fields such as the military and intelligence agencies. She has undergone different kinds of programming. As we shall see later, her story makes evident that she must have undergone the Delta assassin program as well. As mentioned in the "Introduction" she was trained to handle all types of weapons. Nathalie will come back to this issue as a whole in more detail later.

The cause of the incident at the Palace Augsburg is still unknown to this day. Probably it had to do with disagreements within certain branches of the elite. Or maybe they wanted to see how Nathalie would react in such a situation. Or was it a hidden message for others?

It is obvious that at the Palace Augsburg they did not want to kill Nathalie. There are other ways to do that. Moreover, they have not tried to kill her to date. As her story will show, there is a reason for that. Nathalie is not just someone. As we will see, her real parents must belong to one of the top families among the elite.

The most dangerous country for a fashion model

After Augsburg, I had bookings for several jewelry shows in Switzerland. The first show was in Zurich. The second was in Davos and the third later that year in Laussanne. The choreographer was Austrian. I was the only model booked from Austria. The other girls came from Paris, Milan, Florence and the United States.

All the jewel shows were for De Beers, Bvlgari, Cartier, Harry Winston, Piaget and Chopard.

When I arrived at the airport of Zurich, standing in line for the passport control, a man walked up to me asking for my passport. He took a short look at my passport. “You don't have to wait here, you can pass through. Please follow me,” he said.

I entered Zurich through the special gate where politicians go through without passport control. At that moment, I realized that this was not the first time. It had happened before as well, when I was booked in Zurich for the fashion shows. Until then, I had never paid any attention to it. I had never considered that this was not normal.

After I compared my passport with two Dutch travelers, I found out that my passport was different from theirs. I noticed that my passport had codes and a different cover. My passport had a red cover. Was the color of my passport the reason that the man at the airport noticed me? Was he perhaps waiting for me? Did he know that I was arriving?

Then the next strange thing happened. From the beginning the models were booked into the hotel where the clients roamed. The choreographer was booked into another hotel. I got a hotel suite, also in another hotel. I was isolated from the other models.

The fashion show was not open to the public. It was especially held for the leading diamond gods of the gemstone world. De Beers, Oppenheimers, the Rockefellers and members of the Habsburger famil y

There were also other members of other top families present. The show was also filled with high ranking politicians.

The jewels we had to show were owned by some of the richest members of these families. They were not for sale. Just on parade, so all would be ensured that their richness was still there. A show to impress each other.

Shows like this were also called “Special bookings”. The girls were handpicked for such family shows.

During the show in Zürich, I was picked out to show the most expensive “watch” in the world. This watch belonged to the Oppenheimer family. My makeup was blue, even my lips where blue. I was dressed in a black evening dress tight to the body. I was put in some weird cubicle, where firstly I had to stand in and show the watch, while sliding the watch over my body. Then I had to step out and walk over the stage. If you want to know how to drive these super rich families nuts, just touch their crown jewels. They get mighty nervous when you do that. They are totally paranoid when it comes to their family jewels. The jewels shown in general are of that value that even the normal rich and famous cannot buy them.

Some jewels are so extremely expensive that when a model went to the toilet wearing the jewels, security men accompanied them to the toilet.

I am not kidding. It happened to me. Before I went on stage I had to go to the toilet first. I had the watch already in my hands when I walked to the toilet. The guards ran after me taking the watch out of my hand. They were looking extremely nervous. Believe me, it is a very strange sensation when you have to pee and a security man is standing outside in front of the toilet door waiting for you.

After the show I only wanted to do one thing; get dressed and leave. I had a strange sensation about these people. They paid too much attention to my personal appearance. Their need to touch my skin was huge. I wanted to leave as soon as possible. I put my shirt jeans and boots on, grabbed my jacket and bag. Before I could leave, a man came in. “No, you cannot leave now. Please put on one of the gowns.”

Then he took a necklace that he wanted to put around my neck.

“No, either I go as I am dressed or I won´t go,” I said.

They had no choice.

When I entered the room with my jeans and boots, they introduced me by my name and status in the show.

In the room were the super rich among the elite. Among them David Rockefeller, the world biggest diamond producer, De Beers and members of the Rothschilds.

All of a sudden there was a bit of commotion in this beehive. A very old lady, and I mean a really very old woman, came in and everybody made way for her. She looked like she was hundreds of years old. On both sides of her, two men who seemed to be bodyguards helped her to walk straight. She was covered with jewels. They seemed so heavy that the man needed to keep her arms up. Otherwise they would go down due to the weight of her braces and heavy rings.

She came to me and stroked my arm. “I am honored to meet you. You have a beautiful skin.”

I pulled back. “Yeah sure. Thank you.”

Apparently, people who have everything seek the one thing they cannot have, I thought. Then I turned away and walked straight to the exit door and got in a cab. All I wanted was to return safely to the hotel.

To make a long story short, I could not remember anything from that moment on. The umpteenth repetition of what had also happened before.

Davos

Three weeks later, I was booked for the following jewelry show in Switzerland. This was the second show in Switzerland. This time the show was in Davos. Again I entered Switzerland without passport control. Again I was put in a hotel suite in a different hotel than the other models. This time I knew one thing, stay awake and lock and barricade the door.

The show was even more luxurious then the one in Zurich. As the other show, all guests were from elite families and some royal family members. There were many bodyguards and security men in and outside of the hotel. Certain members of the elite did not go anywhere without their bodyguards.

Important politicians were also present. The tension was extreme amongst some of them. At the same time that we were in Davos for the jewelry show, there was the yearly meeting of the ruling families and politicians. This happened all the time, especially during jewelry shows in Switzerland. Political meetings and special fashion shows or jewelry shows at the same time were common.

Switzerland is extremely important in the political scene. Political leaders are regularly summoned to come to Basel, Zurich, Geneva or Davos to meet with the elite. In closed meetings they have to report and receive orders. However, the politicians don't just come to talk about politics, they come for their rewards as well; special shows where they can freely pick models.

These types of fashion shows or jewelry shows have nothing to do with the so called show seasons in Paris, Milan, London or Munich. The jewelry shows in Switzerland are not open for the public or for the press. Dates for these shows are not random. They are well picked dates according to the agenda’s of the elite. The fashion models booked for these shows are also not randomly booked. You don't see absolute top models for shows like this. You only see the “Special booking” models. Nowadays, I know that these shows only book mind controlled models.

During the show, certain guests were allowed to come backstage before the show started. One time the moment these people came in, one of the men pointed at me.

“She is the one,” he said in Swiss German.

“Excuse me, the one for what?” I asked him.

He smiled in a fake way. “We would like you to come and sit with us at our table after the show.”

“What if I don't want?”

“That would be a pity and we really do not like that.”

“I have to think about it,” I answered.

After the show I dressed myself in my own clothes. I ignored the evening gown that was laid out for me to wear after the show. In my jeans and shirt I walked into the room where everybody was sitting at the tables. The men looked disappointed when they saw me entering the room in jeans and shirt. Yet, they invited me to sit at their table.

Nothing interesting happened at the table. I was bored. “It´s time for me to go. I have to get up early in the morning,” I said after thirty minutes.

They tried to stop me. I didn´t listen. I got up from the table and walked backstage, grabbed my bag and left, thinking that I was controlling things. But once again I was wrong.

Blood on my hands

Back in the hotel I took a bath and went to bed around 9:30 PM. The next day when I woke up, I pushed my hair to the back, I saw blood, dried blood on my hands. I jumped out of the bed and went to the window to have a close look at my hands. It was really blood. Then I noticed that I was naked. When I turned around I saw an evening gown dropped over one chair. My head went what the fuck? That was not my dress? I had no evening gown with me. I walked to the chair and lifted the gown up to look at what sort of a dress it was and from which designer. Then I saw that there was also blood on the gown. There were blood spatters on the front of the dress.

What had happened to me this time? This was something completely different than the previous times. I remembered that, when I left the show the night before, I felt safe and that I was sure that I was controlling things.

What went wrong?

Then I remembered that I had forgotten to pull the phone out. Was I maybe beeped up? Ever since I suspected that the phone played a role with the incidents that happen to me in the hotels, I always unplugged it before I went to bed.

I swore to myself never again, I would never accept any bookings from Switzerland ever again. Lamentably, I still had one jewelry show to do in Lausanne at a later date. I could not cancel this show. Canceling shows that you were booked for was not a wise thing to do for a model. If you start to cancel jobs, they won´t book you any longer. So, I knew that I had to do one more show time in Switzerland.

Dzengi

After the jewelry show in Davos it was time for the “Munich fair”. I was booked with some models from Vienna, including Bridget. After the show, I was invited by the customers to the most famous club in the 80s. Many famous musicians, actors and top models went there. It was like a hangout place for the music and movie world. I was pointed towards one table in the back, filled with artists. I did not like it and left the club after half an hour. When I entered my room at the hotel, my little dog Dzengis was very happy that I had returned. He hated being alone in a hotel room. I was always able to take Dzengi with me. He liked it, he had gotten used to traveling so much.

Dzengi made clear that he wanted me to go out with him. When we left the hotel, I noticed that Dzengi always stopped in front of the same apartment entrance to pee and bark. I thought, he probably like this spot. I was wrong.

The next evening, when I went walking with Dzengi, I got a tough confrontation. After we left the hotel, I let Dzengi run free. He went directly to the Münchner Freiheit Platz, a pleasant square. Then he turned to the left, straight to the apartment entrance where he, as mentioned before, always stopped to pee and bark. This time he didn´t pee. He stood there, looked at me, began to bark and then he looked at the door of the building. It seemed that he wanted to tell me something.

I looked at the entrance. At once I got a frightening feeling. I walked across the street to have a better look at the building. I never before noticed the apartment. But now, it looked familiar. I did not know anybody that lived there, so why did the apartment look familiar?

I closed my eyes and tried to concentrate. Something had to be going on with this apartment. Instantly I got an image of me standing in front of an open door. A man with black hair was standing in the opening of the door. Then he pulled me inside and pressed me against the wall, ripped my coat open and kissed me.

My heartbeat went up and I realized that this was the building where I was raped. Dzengi must have been there before. Was that the reason he always barked at the entrance of this apartment? He must have been with me when I was rapped.

I felt sick to my stomach, called Dzengi and returned to my hotel. Back at the hotel I tried to discover if I could remember anything else. I still didn´t know how it was carried out. It dawned on me that they, as I had previously suspected, made use of the phone. There was no other explanation. F rom that moment on I promised myself not only pull the phone out at night before going to bed in Switzerland, but also in all hotels in other countries where I stayed.

I asked myself many questions. How did they get me to leave my room? How did they pressurize me to take my dog with me? How did they make me forget and do the things they wanted me to do? Why could I not remember anything?

That night I barricaded the hotel room. I put the dresser in front of the door and pulled the phone out. How incredible it may sound, when I woke up the next morning, everything was all right. No strange things had happened.

Diners Club

Back in Vienna, I was booked for the famous high class credit card company “Diners Club”. Almost every month they organized shootings for a magazine exclusively for the high class society. I knew that the normal classes would never see these magazines. These magazines are not for sale in shops. They were made and sent directly to the elite clients.

Peter Gorecki was the photographer booked for the Diners Club shooting. The bookings of the models were not randomly. It was according the choice of not only the president of the Diners Club but of the top customers as well. They actually had a say in which models would be used. After each edition they would rebook only the models that had been chosen by the elite clients.

I was chosen over and over again. Diners Club became my regular client. Dressed like a rich bitch, in luxuries sportswear, from hunting gear to underwear and nightgowns, always in or around the latest sports car.

That day the shootings for Diners Club were at the Lugeck square. After the shooting, I left the building and walked down the square to the taxi. Just then I felt something strange happen. My feet felt as if they were glued to the ground. I could not walk. The feeling I got in my backbone, was very outlandish. As if someone used an electrical shock stick to prevent me from walking. I turned around and looked straight into the face of the American who had drugged me in Amsterdam. He was dressed in a crème colored suit and looked different, much older. He did not say anything, nor did he move.

The moment I wanted to say something, the weird feeling disappeared. I was in shock and decided to walk to the cab. As I was walking away, I turned around and saw him still standing. This time he was quite old fashioned dressed, short haircut, and a blond girl was with him. She was hanging on his arms, as if her live depended on him.

I kept walking to the cabs, got into one and drove off. I looked back one time. He was still standing there, staring at the cab. I was convinced the American did something that caused me to freeze. Why? What was he

doing here in Vienna? As always, I shook my thoughts away. I told myself, not to waste time to think about the American.

At the Münchner Freiheit Platz

Time passed by and I was busy working. The catalog season had ended and it was time for the German market again. I went to Stuttgart for a few direct bookings. After Stuttgart I went to Cologne and Dusseldorf to end up again in Munich; the last stop of that hectic period.

I arrived in Munich two days before we had to start working. I had two days off and went shopping with Bridget. When we came back from shopping we had to pass the Münchner Freiheit Platz, a hip square with many terraces. Like always, it was too busy.

We had to go in between the tables, to reach the street of our hotel. At that moment Bridget tapped me on my arm .

“Hey do you know these men? Look they are staring and pointing at you.”

I saw four men. One was standing and three were sitting at a table. We had to pass them by. Bridget walked in front of me, when we approached their table. She forced the man who was not sitting at the table, to step aside. My dog followed her.

“Is that her dog?” I heard a familiar American voice ask.

“Yes,” answered one of the men.

I turned my face to look at the American voice. It was the American! I wanted to react and address him. Then I heard the sound of a click. Black spots everywhere. For a moment everything turned black. Something prevented me from reacting and speak to him. I could not say anything. I just looked away and passed them by. All of a sudden, I was strongly focused on my dog. All I wanted to do was getting back to the hotel.

Back at the hotel, Bridget asked again if I knew those people.

“No, I never saw those men before.”

“So, why did that man wanted to know if Dzengi was your dog?”

I looked at her. “I have no idea.”

Paris at the Eifel tower

A few days later I was back in Vienna. Later that month I was booked for Paris for an exclusive fashion show at the Eifel tower. The show was organized by the Austrian embassy in Paris.

The models were booked in a hotel opposite of the embassy. They had to share their rooms, but as usual I got a room by myself. It was a three days booking, from fittings to hair, makeup and dress rehearsals. The fashion show felt like some slave market for the elite. The show had one of these "Boys bands". They just had started, but became very popular later. It was peculiar that the show was filled with male guests, mostly politicians. There were hardly any females. During the show, the politicians choose those girls they desire. Some girls did hook up with some of these men. I did not stay and went to my hotel.

When I entered the hotel, Demetrius came to me. She begged me to be her chaperone the next day. She had a date with the Ambassador of the Austrian embassy. She did not want to go alone. I told her not to worry. "I will be there."

When I entered the Syrian restaurant the next day, the Ambassador was sitting at one of the tables. He told me that Demetrius could not come; if I mind to have dinner with him alone. I accepted. In the meantime I felt that it had been a setup. If the Ambassador thought that he was getting me into his bed, than he had it coming.

After dinner he asked me to come with him to the premier of *The Big Blue* . Because I really wanted to see that movie, I said yes. The Ambassador behaved like a gentlemen. He did not try to make a pass at me and brought me back to the hotel in his limo.

"You are not like the other models. You are different. you better get out of the scene. It is better for your safety," he said when he left me at the hotel.

I thanked him. I knew exactly what he meant. He noticed that I did understand what he meant. "Be aware of men like me preying on models"

was what he intended to tell me.

When I came back to Vienna I took a few weeks off. I disappeared from the scene. I booked myself into a chalet in the mountains, just about two hours away from Vienna.

Dzengi loved it. He could run as much as he wanted for a few days in the wild nature.

This was not the first time. When things got too weird or I felt too much pressure from men, I would book myself out and disappear for a week and sometimes for weeks in a row. I didn´t tell anybody when or where I went. This caused situations with the other models trying to find me or the agency calling me for b ookings. I maintained this safety mode until the end when I stepped out of the scene.

After the show in Paris, again I wanted to stop as a fashion model. But at that moment I was fully booked all the way into the following year. I also had to do the last jewelry show in Switzerland. I had to complete my contract. As planned, this would be my last time in Switzerland.

Lausanne

The last jewelry show in Switzerland was in Lausanne. There were many politicians present, some with girlfriends but most were alone. I was the only model from Austria. Like the previous times, I was set up in a complete different hotel than the other models. When I came to Lausanne I was picked up. My suitcase was brought to my hotel. I was brought to the hotel where the jewelry show was held for the fittings. I arrived last, but was treated as the most important model.

They made the other models wait, while I was fitting the evening gowns. I finished the fittings, long before the other models that had arrived before me. So, they brought me to my hotel.

When I entered the hotel I remember wondering about the absence of models. But I was too tired to go looking for the other models. I went straight up to my room. It was a huge suite with a huge bed. After I put the water on for a bath, I noticed that my suitcase had been opened. It was open at one side. When I looked in it, I saw that all my underwear was gone!

I got very angry. My underwear was gorgeous and very expensive. All from Dior, Valentino, La Perla, et cetera.

I called the choreographer and told him that all my underwear was stolen. ”I hope you have a good insurance, because you are going to pay. ”

The next day, the clients who had booked me handed me 5.000 German Marks (2.950 dollar) to go underwear shopping. I spend every cent on underwear. I was happy, because I did not have to bother with the insurance.

That night we had the fashion show. I did not stay for one of the parties. I went straight to the hotel. The next morning, when I woke up, I felt extremely tired. I saw my high heels and an evening gown lay on the floor. I cannot describe how I felt when I looked at the gown. It was not my evening dress.

Then I experienced an awful moment. When I pulled the blanket away to get up, I noticed that I had a corset on. I was surprised to see the corset. I

had not bought any corset the day before. I did not like them and never wore them.

I got out of bed and wanted to take the corset off. When I touched it I saw blood on my hands. I felt the shivers all over my body. I hurried to the bathroom to wash my hands. When I looked in the mirrors I saw dried blood on my upper legs as well. I did not have my period. This blood couldn´t be mine. I stood there, nailed to the ground. I saw that there was blood on the evening dress as well. So I threw it together with the corset away; after all they were not mine. Then I washed my hands and checked my body for sperm. I didn´t find any. Then I put the bath on and started to clean the room. To my surprise I saw one of the purses I had lost a year ago.

To me it became lucid; whosoever victimized me was sending me messages. This was the second time they brought me back to my room without taking the clothes away. They knew, by leaving everything on the floor, I would realize that they had me completely under their control. We are in charge of you no matter what you do.

It hit me like you have no idea. I knew from that moment on that I had to leave the business. I realized that day that no matter what I did, I could not protect myself against these mysterious powers. I realized that now things were getting very dangerous .

This was the second time that I woke up in Switzerland, completely smeared with blood. From who was this time the blood on my hands and on the corset? Did I maybe kill somebody? I had read about satanic blood rituals. Was it possible that I had participated in one of these rituals?

I felt strongly that now it was time to quit. Yet, I still had to finish many bookings before I could get out.

When I left my room and went downstairs, I was approached by a man and a woman. They told me that they needed to talk to me urgently. What they had to say was astonishing.

They asked me if I was willing to get a child from a certain eminent person. They told me that I was specially selected; that I had no idea who I really was; from which relatives I descended. How important it was for me to have offspring.

“If you get pregnant we will take your baby and take good care of it. When you agree, we will pay you a lot of money,” the man said.

“Nobody can ever pay me to pop a child. There will be no alien growing in my belly,” I answered.

They looked at each other. “We are allowed to offer you millions of Swiss francs.”

I told them to take a hike and walked away. I got into a cab and drove of to the airport. It is needless to state that my mind was ticking.

“What the fuck! Who are these people that they think they can buy a child from me? Why did they especially want a child from me?” I thought.

I decided not to enter into a relationship with any man and to stay away from sexual intercourse for the remaining time that I was still a model.

The Trachten shooting

When I came back to Vienna I had a list of bookings. One booking was into the Austrian Alpes, for a “Trachten” shooting. “Trachten” is the typical Austrian clothing style; the “Heidi” style.

We were in the mountains for the shootings, when the light was blocked by a cloud and we had to take a break. I took my bottle of water and went up to a higher part where you had a bench and you could sit down to look over the mountains.

All of a sudden I heard an American male voice greeting me. I looked around, wondering where it came from. I had to squint my eyes. The sunlight blocked me from seeing his face clearly.

“Do I know you?” I asked.

“I have to tell you something,” he answered.

“What? I don't know you, so what do you have to tell me?”

“Don't be like that. You have no idea.”

“Be like what?” I sneered at him. After all, who was this man bugging me were my thoughts.

“Listen to me. Officially I am not allowed to talk to you. I know that you have no idea what happens to you each time you go to bed early. There are men interested in you. Please listen to me...”

“Nathalie, come back at once. The sun is at the right position,” I heard the photographer calling me.

I jumped up and looked at the man. “Listen, wait here for me. Don't leave, we have to talk.”

When I walked away, I stopped halfway, thinking that what this man had to say was way more important than the photos.

When I looked back, it turned out that he had disappeared. Where did he go?

I looked around and saw a car driving away. Why didn´t I listen to him? I understood that this man was referring to those m ysterious people who did not leave me alone. Or maybe he was one of them, someone who had

control over me. The feeling of being hunted crept up on me. I was not comfortable any longer in front of the camera. I wanted to go home, pack my things and leave.

The end of my fashion model career

I still had some bookings in the south of France to do, but refused any new ones. After I came back from France I told the head of the “Wilhelmina Wien” agency that I was going to step out of the scene; that I did not want to work as a model any longer.

She looked at me. ”Do you know for sure you want to quit the business? We urgently need a new booker. Don't you want to become a booker? I am sure, that you will be a really good booker.”

“Sounds interesting, I have to think about it,” I promised.

I did think about her offer for one week. I thought that as a booker I might be able to find out how models were misused and offered to the privileged. My mind was set strongly on spying on the business. I decided to accept the offer, but I would only work as a booker for one year.

I started as a booker in 1992. I was working in the woman department and became department manager within a few months.

As and ex fashion model I knew exactly what the clients wanted. I knew how they looked at the girls and what sort of girls they wanted. I called in all the girls and started to clean out the agency. I also called in the girls that had not worked for more than a year. I wanted to check their looks. I kicked some of these girls out. To other girls I told them to cut or color their hair. And some of the girls were ordered to do something about their breasts .

I even called in all girls who were supposed to be bathing suit or underwear models to check their bodies out. I made sure I got good underwear and bathing suit models in for the agency. These models made way more cash than the editorial or catalog girls.

I made many girls nervous. They knew that I knew the business and that they could not fool me or play tricks on me.

I discovered within one month that one of the male bookers at “Wilhelmina Wien” was a coke addict. He also called young girls into the agency to get them on coke to have sex with them and to book them for parties of the elite. I wanted him out of the agency.

I informed the supervisor and the addicted booker was fired. After he was kicked out, I checked the girls he brought in. All of them were coke snorers. I fired them all. I refused to sell junkies to the customers.

Models on demand

While I was working as a booker, I was also looking for proof of trafficking in models. I didn´t know how they did it. That was still the big question.

As a booker, in the beginning I was never contacted by anyone, asking for a special girl, until the day of the shooting of a new “head sheet”.

The “head sheet” was one big poster with the faces of all models represented by the agency. It was a supplement. The agencies also have books where all the models they offer are represented. Agencies could choose between a “head sheet”, a book or both.

When they were making the layout for the “head sheet” I noticed that not only the name of the model was put under the face of the model but also certain numbers. The numbers were not from 1, 2, 3, and so on. They were random numbers like 23, 56, 98 and 112 .

I knew that all models possess their own personal number and that most “top models” have a second number because they fall under special bookings.

It was very strange that the normal models on the “head sheet” also had a second number. It did not make any sense to me. The normal models were unknown new faces in the business.

When I asked, nobody was able to give me a sensible answer. So, I asked the supervisor. She said by the second numbers they can order the special bookings.

“I understand that we have “top models” who fall under special bookings, but what about the models that just enter the scene? They are not famous at all. None of them is a special booking. So, why do they have a second number?” I asked.

The supervisor did not react. “Sorry I am not allowed to say anything.”

Then she got up. All of a sudden she found it necessary to leave the agency.

I started to check the “head sheets” from agencies in Paris and Milan. I noticed that all agencies used double numbers for the normal models. The

numbers were identical at all the agencies.

On the day they started to take the photos for the “head sheet”, one of the persons in command wanted me also to take a photo. “We need a photo from you, as well,” he said.

“No way, I quit as a model and I am working exclusively as a booker,” I made clear to him.

Then I thought, why not accept? This way I can figure out what sort of a number they put on me.

No surprise... I was numbered with a double number.

Nowadays I know that the normal models with double numbers were mind programmed Beta sex slaves. They could be ordered for sex by their second number .

The “top models” with a second number are Monarch mind controlled models. They do special bookings. Among other high class elite sex parties.

With time I found out that some of the super models had just one number. Top models with only one number are not programmed. They are not Monarch controlled models or Beta sex slaves. They are not available for sex on request.

“Wilhelmina Models” in New York

In 1995, after being a booker for one year at “Wilhelmina Wien” in Vienna, I was asked if I wanted to work as a booker at the Wilhelmina headquarters in New York. I accepted because this way I would be able to get to know how the organization was set up and figure out what took place behind the scenes.

Wilhelmina International Inc. was founded in 1967 by the Dutch model Wilhelmina Cooper and Fran Rothschild.

Horst Dieter Esch, a German businessman bought the agency in 1989. He was a tall fat German business man who simply started to buy up modeling agency´s for his own pleasure; money and free sex. Dieter was also known for buying out top bookers from other agencies. Afterwards he put them at a lower position in his organization, just to take over good bookers from other agencies, so his agency would do well. The company currently constitutes one of the oldest and largest full-service model management companies in the world.

I knew that Dieter had other business men, his friends scouting the former Soviet Union countries for new young models. Most of these girls ended up as sextons for his friends.

Dieter was used to it that everybody bowed for him and his wishes. Many bookers were actually afraid of him. He was a man without any feelings for other humans. He also had no background in the fashion world. Yet he did hold most of the agencies worldwide.

Dieter was nasty and tried to seduce me in his office. After I slapped him in his face, he looked surprised. One action from a booker he had not seen coming.

“You can forget about working as a booker for me. But, you know what? Why don't you work as a model again? You still look very young and I know many customers would like to have you,” he said.

The way he said it gave me the creeps. By this I knew Dieter and the Wilhelmina agency were into pimping their models out as well Just as the

other models agencies, like John Casablancas “Elite” Model Management agency, did back then.

I said goodbye to Dieter, left the office and decided to check out some other agencies in New York. It didn’t take long before I discovered that most agencies were into crime as well. New York had a lot of nasty man with their own agencies. All were scanning the streets for new fresh meat; promising young girls the world. Now you also know why so many men want to have their own modeling agency.

I knew one thing, that it was time to leave this sick city. I had discovered enough. I had enough of the whole fashion industry and modeling world. It was now really time to turn my back to the fashion world. It was time for me to go back to the Netherlands and do some research into what happened to me as a child.

Fashion industry facts

The fashion industry is everywhere. It is a world of make believe. It tells the masses how to look and how to behave. It is needed to keep women on track, to classify ages and to make the many normal adult females amongst the masses, feel as if they are not worthy of anything .

The fashion industry needs each season new models, especially young girls. As a result, each year about a million boys and girls decide that they want to become a model. Further thousands of little girls are pushed by their mothers to become famous and pass the fashion mill each year.

Consequently, opportunist roam and pimps are easily born. Evil behavior is the only thing that can be born in such a world. That’s how it was in the 80´s and still is.

It is very dangerous for every young girl to become part of the fashion world. They have no protection at all. Bookers do not protect the models. Bookers bow to their clients. The more prestigious the clients, the more slave like behavior they get from the bookers. This is also the case when it comes to agency owners.

The modeling world, bears the resemblance of a human trade market very much. Most agencies are nothing less than whorehouses and the bookers are pimps. The modeling business equals a brothel that clients call in, not just to book the girls for fashion shoots or shows, but for special sex parties. In addition, we may not forget that there are a lot of homosexuals in the fashion industry. Many of them drug young hetero boys to ‘baptize’ them into the homosexual world.

The fashion industry hides behind the words "fashion photos", "shootings", "covers", "fashion shows", "special bookings", "campaigns", "cover girl, "supermodel" and "top model". All words, terms and activities that evade and protect the countless dangers of the world of fashion.

I know while I am writing this, that the modeling world will scream “not true” and will come up with many excuses.

Well, too bad then, because I know it´s the truth. Everybody in the fashion industry knows that there is a lot of sexual harassment and that

models are drugged for sex parties as well. We also know that models are beaten to pulp or got their faces cut up if they dare to open their mouths .

We all know that many girls have been killed as well. Many died falling from a balcony or in other mysterious ways. And we also know how many girls disappeared.

I have experienced situations where models went out, mainly the young ones, who never returned back to the hotels.

I have experienced fashion shows where female models who had gone out at night did not return and were never found again. Situations like that where always silenced.

Famous Top Models

To advance their careers, most famous top models, just as many actresses, are willing to give up their dignity in order to maintain their covers or campaigns and especially their status. Without sleeping with the right men, they would not have made it to the top back in the 80´s. This is a fact that counts for today as well. Noami Campbell is a very good example.

I don't care what these super models will say, when they read this book. I was there and have seen many of these cases.

Becoming a famous top model has nothing to do with the model herself, but with the fact that they need exceptional models in order to keep the dream alive.

The modeling industry is a farce, a joke in itself. In the beginning it was a trade for beauty business, but has become a hardcore human selling and trading business. It even has become way more dangerous than it used to be in my days. It is incredible how bookers behave around fashion models today. How they treat the young models and how they talk about these girls.

Today it is all about sex. The fashion world today is nothing else but a pimping world. The hottest models are available for use and abuse. They are not only numbered and offered in special fashion catalogues, they are also being paraded for sale on the “catwalks” .

If you are a parent or if you have young children or teenagers who are considering a career as a fashion model or if they want to work in the entertainment industry, keep your children as far away from the fashion industry, Hollywood and other entertainment industries as possible.

Back in the Netherlands after 15 years

After New York I went straight to the Netherlands to do some research into what happened to me as a child. I had one thing in mind; the moment I would be in the Netherlands I would see my father to ask him questions.

I was aware that I probably would wake up sleeping dogs. But I didn't mind. I had too many questions. At all costs I needed to find out what had happened. I wanted to know so badly, that it blinded me for future dangers coming my way.

I first went to my mother. She still lived in Leiden, only 25 minutes from the airport by train. I wanted to stay a few days with her to ask questions.

It was the year 1996. I had been away for 15 years and I was really shocked by the backwardness of the Dutch society. It was as if time had stood still in this country. I did not know that things went bad in the Netherlands since the 80s; that they were trying to recover from a financial crisis. I had been living in a world that had been closed to common news and issues of the common man.

I was also shocked when I arrived at the house of my mother. I did not recognize the woman. She looked very old. She was extremely fat and she smelled weird, in fact nasty. Thank God she had a bed for guests. The first night I slept well, simply because I was tired.

when I woke up the next day, my mother was preparing coffee. I watched her, remembering what she had done to me when I was a child. I could also not forget what she did to the babies and the other children. I knew that I couldn't trust her. Still, to her I pretended to have forgotten the things she did.

While preparing coffee, she started to ask me certain questions.

"What have you been doing all these years?"

"You know I have been working as a model. Why do you ask?"

"Yes I know, but what else have you been doing? Did bad things happen to you?" she asked.

"What do you mean? Specify your question?"

“Ah, I see you don't remember what has happen to you,” she answered.

That was her mistake. I was sure that she knew something about the horrors I had experienced. Because of her blunder, I was on my guard from that moment on.

The next day the sister of my mother had come for a visit, especially because I had returned. When she arrived and sat down, she looked at me.

“You really don't age. Look at you, how old are you now? You look like you’re sixteen years old,” she said surprised.

Then she turned to my mother. “Does she know? Does she know by now, who she is?” she asked in papiamentu, her own language.

I stiffened, but before I could react, my mother yelled to her sister.

“Shut up, she does not know anything. I know for sure,” she screamed, also in Papiamentu.

I got up. ”Do you think I do not understand Papiamentu? Do you think that I did not know what you said? Whatever it is that you are hiding for me, I will find out bitch. If you do not want to tell me anything, I´ll go to Amsterdam to talk to my father.”

I was just two days back in the Netherlands and I knew that I was not mistaken. My mother was involved; that much was sure. Everything I had been suspecting must be true .

To find out more about what had happened to me, who I was and where I came from, I knew that I needed to find my father. I also knew that I had to leave the house of my mother. That is why I moved to the home of my brother, who also lived in Leiden.

I still had no idea what happened to me during the first seven years of my life. I only remembered that my mother and a stranger picked me up from a location with men wearing white coats, when I was seven. For me, my life started from my seventh year.

I knew that my father lived in Amsterdam. However, I could not find him. Two weeks after I had returned to the Netherlands, I received a message from a municipality official of the city hall of Amsterdam. My father had been shot and had died. But the next day somebody of the municipality office called me and told me that a mistake had been made. My father was not shot, he had died from a drugs overdose.

“Can I see his body,” I asked.

“That was not possible, you´re not allowed to see him,” was the answer.

I couldn´t believe that my father died from an overdose. It was a bit too accidental. Was it possible that he was killed before I could talk to him? Who knew that I was looking for my father? Was it possible that my mother had something to do with his death? Why was it so important to keep my childhood secret?

I sat back thinking what to do next. I was convinced that my father would have told me the truth. I never forgot how he told me to find out who I was for real. He must have known more. I was aware that he probably was not allowed to tell me. But, maybe he could have told me what happened during my childhood. And now all of a sudden he was dead Coincidence does not exist.

Amsterdam

As said before, at that time I lived with my brother in Leiden. He had a very strange behaving girlfriend. I lived there a few months, until I discovered that the girl was using my clothes and my bras. I almost banged her head against the wall when I discovered this. My brother jumped in between and saved her.

I did not like Leiden, so I decided that the best thing to do was to find a house and a job in Amsterdam.

Cezar, an old friend rented me his attic in Amsterdam.

I was 33 years old when two homosexuals offered me the setting up of a men only modeling agency. I scouted the men and found a fabulous looking group of young man. I also found the right location for the agency, bought the office furniture, set up the shooting for a “head sheet” and booked the photographer. Everything went well until the day they had to pay a bundle of huge bills and it turned out that they had no money. This made me turn my back on them and look for another job.

One evening I was invited by one of my friends, a male model. He took me to a life music club. There he presented me to Thijs, the manager of the club. We talked for a while. Then suddenly he offered me a job at the club. That was a surprise. I could stop looking for a job. I was happy to have one now.

The club was a hangout place for people from of the music world. All famous artists, when they visit the Netherlands, go to this club.

Thijs was a nice guy. We dated shortly. Then he asked me to move with him to an apartment at the Prinsengracht, one of the canals in Amsterdam. I was happy to move away from Leiden to Amsterdam. The apartment at the Prinsengracht was too small for two persons. After three months we moved to a bigger apartment, one street behind the famous Vondelpark.

The moment I started to live with Thijs, I discovered that he was using some medicine because he was lacking some enzyme. He was taking light blue pills. He was also handicapped, due to an accident. He had been a flight instructor in the military. One day he had crashed with his plane. He

broke every bone and got metal plates and screws in his legs and ankle. For that reason he needed a bike to get around as he could not walk long distance.

Thijs did know anything about my background. I never told him anything about my past or about my years as a model. Strangely enough he never asked anything about my past either.

The Arabs

Then something odd happened. We lived in a ground floor apartment and had a garden. Opposite of our garden was the garden and house of one of the neighbors. Above her there was an apartment that had been empty from the beginning that we moved in. 3rd week of July people moved in. I noticed that everything was white. The curtains where white and when the doors were open you could see white office furniture and white chairs. I did not think any further about the house until a few days after the people moved in, the woman living opposite of us called me.

“You have to watch out,” she said.

“Watch out for what?”

“You know that the house above me is now occupied; but they don't live there. It is used as a kind of office,” she continued.

“What does that have to do with me?” I asked her surprised.

“They have been taking photos of you and they have been filming you in your house. Do you know why they film you?” she almost yelled.

“What! Who is filming me?”

“These Arab men.”

“Arab men? What sort of Arab man, do you mean Moroccan men? ”

“No Arabs like Dubai dressed Arabs. Nathalie I don't trust them. They are very interested in you.”

“Are they Dubai Arabs? You mean dressed in white with their heads covered?”

“Yes, they film you all the time. Yesterday they filmed you while you were reading your magazines,” she yelled.

I looked up at their balcony, stepped back into my garden and looked at the house. No life to be seen. I went inside my house and walked straight to Thijs, who was sitting behind his computer.

“Thijs stop working. Listen I have to tell you something.”

“What´s wrong,” he asked.

I told him what the neighbor had told me. This news activated his jealousy. He jumped up angry.

“What... who is watching you?”

Then he went to the garden to look at the house of the Arabs. At the same moment the lights were turned on in the apartment. A man came out on the balcony. He was indeed an Arab, dressed in Dubai style.

Thijs barged towards the balcony and demanded in English to know who he was. He got no answer. First the man did as if he could not understand English. That angered Thijs even more.

“You are filming my girlfriend, you freaks. If I see you do this one more time I will call the police,” he yelled.

Then a second man came outside on the balcony. He said nothing but just stared at me. Thijs warned them another time. Then we went back inside. I went to the bedroom and looked through the window to their balcony. The men had gone back into their so called office.

I really had no idea why these Arabs where watching me. I was more surprised because Thijs was really angry. Not just jealousy anger. It was something else.

Revelations of hidden memories I998

It was in the beginning of the year 1998 that I started to have flashbacks, including about most things I've described so far.

At the time I had read a lot about MK-Ultra, the CIA's illegal human mind control experiments. I was convinced that mind control was the key to the mystery of my youth.

For the first time I realized that my past childhood treatment by my parents, all those terrible things that happened in the orphanages, my work as a fashion model and being beeped up for having sex with the very rich and other prominent men, were all connected and had to do with some kind of “mind control” programming.

In spring of 1998 I became aware of an increase of “news reports” about pedophiles being caught and young children being raped. I was shocked. Most of the time these rapist and pedophiles were not punished by the Dutch system.

Without realizing, I called up my own past by reading these news reports, especially the reports about pedophiles. Memories came floating back about what my parents had done with the children. What they had done with me, especially the father. I became very angry and decided to focus exclusively on any news about pedophiles.

I started to see a pattern. I bought every newspaper to research the news about child abuse (I did not have internet yet).

I discovered that incest was gigantic and rapists of children were hardly punished in the Netherlands. I believed that the Dutch system was protecting these monsters. It was as if I was looking at the making of a pedophile society.

In the summer of 1998, I became even angrier. This was due to a news report that reminded me of myself. A little young girl had killed her father, who had raped her for years. The father had a new wife. After she gave birth to a baby girl, the girl wanted to prevent the father from raping her little new sister. That was the reason she killed her father. She was arrested

and thrown in psychiatry. It was remarkable that the father had been a close friend to the Dutch royal house.

“You know they say as above so below, that everything is connected, cause and effect, that there is a reason for everything and that coincidence does not exist,” I said to Thijs, after I had told him about the little girl.

“Yes that is what they say,” he responded.

“Do you understand this concept,” I asked.

“I don't know. Why do you ask?”

“Well, if we take this to be true and there is a reason for everything, no coincidences, then the rape of little ones is done for a reason and especially the raping of babies must then have a huge meaning.”

I noticed that Thijs did not feel comfy. “Hmm okay, I suppose that is true. But, who would benefit from raping babies,” he asked.

“I don´t know, but for me it is important to find out more about these things.”

Thijs looked very worried. “Better stop looking into maters like that. If you don’t watch out you will get problems. That is a dangerous world.”

“How do you know? Do you know something about that world?”

“Of course not. These are stupid questions. Please promise me not to look into these things. Kitty cat, please leave the pedophiles alone?” he asked me.

I hated him when he called me Kitty cat

Kitty cat is a synonym for Beta Sex Kittens .

“Don't call me Kitty cat. I told you many times not to call me like that. And what the heck are you asking me? Why do you ask me to leave the pedophiles alone? What is it of your business? Do you know some pedophiles or what?”

He got up from his chair turning his back. “I don't need this. I am just worried about your safety”.

“Oh really, who would be a danger to me? Tell me. It seems that you know.”

He looked away. “I don't know, it’s just a feeling.”

I knew he was lying. “You know something; I have been asking God to give me answers to my questions. But He is pretty quit. So I think I am going to ask Lucifer to shed some light and bring me some answers.”

Thijs jumped. “What did you say, Lucifer? Are you crazy, don't do that, it is very dangerous.”

I laughed. “Okay, here you are; an atheist, who doesn't believe in God. But you do believe in the devil. Please tell me how that rhymes?”

Thijs did not answer. He grabbed his keys, went outside and left.

A few days later I saw five articles in different newspapers about pedophiles in the Netherlands and in other countries. Many pedophiles were caught and a pedophile network got busted. Their targets were babies and very young children. I got very furious and jumped around in the house for a few weeks. Thijs was freaking out.

I started to pray and ask God for answers. Who raped babies and why babies? But, God did not answer; there was complete silence. Consequently, I decided to try to call Lucifer up.

Then all of a sudden, this was around September 1998, I received answers and messages. In trance, I started to do writings all pertained to child ritual abuse and raping babies to death, not by the ordinary pedophiles, but by a selected few.

Who was sending me these messages? Was it God or Lucifer? Because I had called Lucifer up, I had a strong feeling at that time, that it was not God but Lucifer .

“Do you really believe that it is Lucifer who is making you write these things?” Thijs asked me.

“It does not matter who it is; if it´s Lucifer or God does not interest me. I am happy getting answers finally.”

“So, why do they rape babies to death?” Thijs continued.

“It is all about obtaining the absolute pure energies of the new born. Babies are the only ones who are of pure essence and bliss due to being born into absolute innocence. That is what they want. You rape a baby to death in rituals and you trap the spirit. They absorb the energies while the baby dies. These fools think by raping a baby to death they become stronger and live longer.”

Thijs jumped up showing a surprised reaction.

“Wow, that is pretty heavy, but who does that?”

“There are many, basically famous people, royal house members, politicians and influential members of the ruling elite who the masses do not know and will never ever see.”

Thijs sat down again seizing me up.

“So, what are you going to do now that you know about what you were looking for?”

Thijs started to cause a feeling inside of me as if I was being interrogated by the police. Therefore, I told him that I knew enough and had no more questions.

Demons and hidden memories 1999

1999 was the last year of the century. Many believes roamed the streets and factual on a global scale. Many people expected something special to happen. The year 1999 would also bring the last two eclipses of the century. One lunar eclipse and a solar eclipse, which would be on August the 11th.

Around May 1999 I started to have strange dreams. The first dream was so real and of such contents that when I woke up, I had to adjust to the here and now. I needed a few minutes to realize that I had woken up from a dream. I sat up looking around me. “How is it possible that a dream can be this real?” I asked myself. Last night I went to bed without any thoughts and I fell asleep nicely.

Then I started to dream about myself flying over different countries. I saw the world from above. It was like I was a bird scanning the earth in search of something. The images were so real, as if I was really a bird looking down at earth. While flying I felt the wind and touched the tops of trees.

The next morning Thijs asked me what I dreamed about.

“I was a bird flying around,” was all I said.

But the dream set my mind to thinking. When I was a little child I would have dreams like this as well. Always flying above countries, yet I did not have such dreams since I was young.

A few days later I had again the same dream. I was flying again over tops of trees, but this time over mountains as well. I was looking down at different countries. Then, all of a sudden I saw an enormous mountain. I flew inside and saw wet dark walls.

This was the moment I woke up. I asked myself if there was someone who was trying to reveal something important to me. I decided to call Lucifer up again. Maybe he would let me know.

That evening, Thijs heard me talking to Lucifer. He started to whine.

“Don't do that please. You have no idea. This can bring you many problems. It is very dangerous to call Lucifer up.”

I saw that Thijs his face was pale.

“Hey, I see that you are serious. Thijs since when do you believe that strong in Lucifer? I thought you did not believe in anything. You don't believe in God, so why do you believe in the devil?”

Thijs looked at me and walked into the bathroom closing the door, without saying a word .

In June 1999 the dreams were getting stronger visually. I was flying in every dream. I felt everything in these dreams and I smelled everything. One night I woke up from a horror dream about children being tortured and raped.

I was looking at Thijs who was still sleeping and got out of the bed. Then I put on my jogging pants, grabbed a cigarette and went into the garden. I noticed that it was still dark. Looking at my watch I saw that it was three o'clock in the morning. I sat down on the lounge chair, lit my cigarette and started to think about the dreams. By then I realized these were not normal dreams.

July 1999 was a rocky month. The dreams became darker and stranger. One time I went straight direction Hollywood. Passing the hills to another part where you could see mansions build on islands. I would pass these mansions in my dreams and see the most strange artworks on top of these mansions looking like huge symbols directed to something in the sky.

Two weeks went by when I had another dream about Hollywood. It was the 9th of August. This dream was the most frightening dangerous dream I had thus far. I was flying straight direction California into the Hollywood hills, where I entered a huge rock formation covered with green trees and bushes. I entered straight into a huge wet walled dark cave, flew straight into it to come to a halt. That was the moment I felt my feet hitting the ground and I stood still adjusting my eyes. I saw many shadows moving in the background. Then saw a light and heard the sound of children muffled crying sounds. I moved closer to the light. I saw many men dressed in what seemed white robes and a group of little children ages between three and maybe six dressed in diapers, hands tied and crying. They looked so afraid. Then the leader pointed at the children. They were pushed to the middle and all of a sudden the grabbing of children started. I watched without moving. At that moment, I seemingly moved, made a noise and the leader turned his

head, looking where the sound came from. He saw me and for one second I looked straight into his eyes. I pulled back and woke up in my bed.

When I woke up I saw Thijs sitting on my bed.

”Kitty cat what happened, what did you dream about?”

“Nothing a weird sexual dream.”

The next night, the night before the eclipse on August the 11 th , I had the worst dream of all dreams. I fell asleep late at night. In this dream I was flying again straight into Hollywood. In this dream I saw orgies with babies. After killing them, they ate the babies. I had also the chance to have a closer look at the leader. I saw something very strange. The leader looked like some alien animal raping babies. That moment I felt dying, I could not breathe any longer.

That was the moment Thijs woke me up.

“Wake up Nat. Wake up. What´s going on?”

I looked at him totally confused, feeling sick to my stomach, due to what I had seen.

“What happened, what did you dream?”

“I had to wake you up because it looked like something was strangulating you, you stopped breathing.”

“Did I really stopped breathing? Hmm strange,” was all I could say. Then I got up in need of a cigarette. Grabbed the pack, got dressed and went outside without saying anything.

Thijs followed me to the garden.

“Nat I believe that you have to stop calling Lucifer up. I believe these dreams are due to you calling him up. You get nightmares. These dreams are not normal dreams. This morning were attacked in your dream. What did you see?”

“Orgies with babies. Hell they even eat the flesh of new born babies,” was all I told him.

Thijs looked at me totally horrified about what I said .

His reaction was priceless. He went down on his knees, grabbing my hands. “Please Kitty cat stop calling Lucifer up. He does these things to you.”

As if this was not enough, something extremely strange happened to me. One day Thijs had been shopping, but forgot something. So, I went out to buy it. When I came back home and entered the house, the wind blew through the house while all doors and windows were closed. Only one window in the bedroom was open. All doors flew open while I was standing in the hallway.

Thijs looked at me as if he was looking at a ghost. “What was that? Where does that wind come from?” he asked me.

“I have no idea.”

Then I went to the toilet. When I closed the door I felt something entering my body through my head. Something happened inside my head. I could hear voices, many voices. Female voices and one male voice, I felt that they were mega angry. I had no idea what language they spoke.

I woke up the moment I opened the door and saw Thijs sitting on the floor in front of the toilet. He looked at me as if he was seeing some alien.

“Kitty cat are you okay?”

I looked at him sitting on the floor. “Why are you sitting on the floor?

He got up without taking his eyes away from me. “Do you know what just happened? You have been in the toilet a really long time. You were speaking in all kind of different languages. There were many different voices and you were speaking very loud. Don’t you remember?” he asked.

“No, but I remember hearing voices in different languages. What sort of languages did you hear me speak Thijs?” I asked him curious .

”One sounded French but was not quite French. Another voice sounded like a strange German dialect and the rest I did not recognize. There were female voices and one male voice. The male voice scared me a lot.”

After what had happened to me that day, I was endowed with information I would otherwise have no way of knowing. Memories from my childhood came floating back in parts, like puzzle pieces thrown on a table. A puzzle I had to make while missing many pieces of it.

However, there was no explanation for what had happened that day in the bathroom. Maybe different spirits or entities had entered my body. I had seen it in movies and on television.

On August the 11th, after the solar eclipse, all of a sudden my senses became extremely high. Feelings, smelling and hearing sounds that are not

audible to others, were put on a sharp mode. I felt like some vampire. Since that day I could not only sense feelings and thoughts of the people I met, I noticed that I had other specific types of psychic abilities as well. I was able to retrieve information from houses and public buildings and predict future events that actually took place afterwards.

I also got the feeling that it might be healthier for me to breakup with Thijs as soon as possible.

The different kind of psychic abilities mentioned by Nathalie have been officially recorded. Heightened abilities, also known as "extrasensory perception" (ESP), are collectively known as "psi phenomenon". They are part of the sixth sense, the ability to obtain information without the use of our five physical senses. Every person is born with it, without consciously realizing it. The most common type of psychic abilities is "intuition", a sort of internal guide. All of the other forms of psychic abilities depend on "intuition".

The years 2000

So much happened in the year 2000, that I don't even know where to begin to explain the madness that happened as of that year.

As mentioned before, my plan was to break up with Thijs as soon as possible. However my plan had to be changed when it came to timing, as we had to move out of the apartment due to massive renovations that were planned. We had to move out before the end of that year 1999.

By the second week of December we found a new house in Westerpark. We moved in quickly. We furnished the house within one week. Each of us had our own bedroom. I simply could not sleep with Thijs in one bed any longer.

One day I walked to the kitchen due to hearing noises outside. When I looked outside through the window, I saw men dressed in white suits doing something in front of my house. Then I heard a sound in the hallway. I opened the door and saw three men being busy in our closets where our electricity and phone cables were connected to. “What are you doing?”

“I cannot tell you, I am not allowed,” one of the men said.

When I closed the door, I bumped into Thijs. He was acting surprised. But he did not say anything. It looked as if he was caught.

My background and the years as a fashion model had made sure that I simply did not trust anyone just like that. The moment someone made me frown, I would question that frown.

Thijs made me frown a lot and I had some suspicions towards him. Although he had served as a soldier, Thijs was not a regular soldier. Sometimes he gave me answers to very complicated military questions as if he was still in active military service. He had an extraordinary knowledge of geography, warfare and politics. He didn´t finish his studies, so it was suspicious how much he knew. N o matter what I asked him about warfare, geography or politics, whether it was about Dutch politics or foreign politics, he had an encyclopedia about these topics in his brain.

At that time, Nathalie still did not know that Thijs had been chosen to keep an eye on her. As we will see, he had the assignment to report on Nathalie to his superiors. Everything was planned from the day Nathalie was introduced to Thijs at the club by her friend.

They were watching every move Nathalie made and they listened to every word she spoke at home. She did not know that she was being taped or recorded.

In the park

In September 2001 I bought a new dog from a junkie. I called the dog Niburu. I walked Niburu always in a park nearby. In the park I met a lot of interesting people. We had long conversations. Among others, we talked about the Dutch laws concerning pedophiles.

I informed them also about the non-profit Paidika Foundation, an organization subsidized by the Dutch government.

The Paidika Foundation hides behind their so-called journal about pedophilia. American expatriate author Joseph Geraci developed the idea of launching this magazine after he relocated in Amsterdam in 1986. In 1987 the first issue was published by the Paidika Foundation, which was created for this reason.

Behind the scenes they are researching sex between little children and adults. Insisting that sex between adults and children is very educative to children. Every pedophile group in the world uses the papers from the Paidika group to justify their lust for toddlers.

I explained to my new friends in the park how pedophile networks work and that they are very dangerous.

My knowledge about pedophiles had a great impact on the people listening. It caused many to look things up on the internet as well. It was remarkable to notice how many people in my surrounding where awakening. Some even wanted to organize a huge demonstration in the Netherlands against pedophiles.

At the beginning of 2002 I got to know one guy called Peter. His dog loved to play with my dog. We walked a lot together and became close friends. Peter worked for the parking management in Amsterdam. He was out in the streets the whole day for his work. Peter was a confident who I could talk to. I needed somebody to talk to and be able to share my thoughts with, get somebody else his opinion on certain matters. He knew about the things that had happened in my life as well.

The remaining year of 2002 I did not do too much other than some research on child abuse and I had many fights with Thijs.

In December 2002 the phone rang early in the morning. Thijs was still sleeping, so I got up to answer it. A female asked for Thijs in Friesian, telling me that his father had passed away. I woke Thijs up and told him that his father had passed away. He jumped up, took the phone and talked to his mother. When he laid down the phone, he told me that he had to go back home to arrange things and attend the funeral. He would be gone for two weeks. I had the house to myself for two weeks; this gave me a peaceful feeling.

The night Thijs came back from Friesland I was watching TV. I told him that I wanted him out. We had many fights but no matter what I called him he refused to leave the house.

The Matrix Reloaded

Then one day in May 2003 Peter came by and asked me if I wanted to go with him to the movies.

“A movie, that is good for you. It will take your mind of things. You should go with Peter,” was Thijs his first reaction.

“Which movie do you want to go to?” I asked.

“It is called the *Matrix Reloaded* . ”

“I have nothing to do and I would like to go. When do you want to go?” I asked.

At that moment Thijs jumped up from his chair saying. “Don´t go to that movie. You don't like movie theatres so why do you go to a movie? I don't want you to go.”

No need to say that both Peter and I were surprised at his reaction.

“Excuse me, first you agree and now you forbid me to go to that movie?”

“No it´s not that Kitty cat. It´s because... well I know that you don't like crowded places. This movie attracts many people. It will be very crowded. You would not like it, better go to another movie,” Thijs answered.

“Are you serious? Do you think that you can tell me not to go to see a movie? Who are you, my master? You must be nuts. If I want to see *Matrix Reloaded* I will watch that movie. You cannot stop me from seeing that movie, capice?”

“We go, but not today,” I said to Peter.”

Thijs calmed down, thinking that I would forget about going to this movie with Peter.

Two days later Peter contacted me telling me that he had to tell me something, that it was urgent. “Is Thijs at home?” he asked.

“No he is at work.”

“I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

Peter´s face looked annoyed when he arrived.

“What is wrong Peter?”

He told me that the day before he had seen Thijs enter the private house of the mayor.

Thoughts raced through my head. Why did Thijs meet in private with the mayor of Amsterdam? It was not normal to visit the mayor in his private house. Had it maybe to do with me? I had no idea .

I had the feeling that Thijs had spied on me for a long time; the way he acts around me and the way he questions me. The questions were way to specific, they are not randomly asked.

Peter looked at me. “What I saw yesterday is very strange. Thijs is a strange guy. I feel that he is dangerous for you. Kick him out or leave him. You‘ve got to break up with him.

A few days later I went shopping in town with Peter when we passed the theatre where they showed the *Matrix Reloaded* . Peter pointed it out to me saying let´s go.

We bought two tickets. It was a movie filled with symbolic things and they pretended to want to wake the people up. It was clear that the makers of de film were trying to tell people a few things. The story was all about love as well. One thing not too many viewers got as a message.

Thijs was still awake when I came back home from the theatre. It was past midnight when I came in. The moment I opened the door he stood in the corridor.

“Where have you been? Why did you not call me?” he almost yelled.

“Why are you still awake?”

“Kitty cat, I was worried.”

“Worried for what?”

He did not answer. “Where have you been?” he asked again.

“I went to the movies to see the *Matrix Reloaded* with Peter.”

He became so angry you have no idea. “Why, I told you not to go. Why did you go, you should listen to me,” he yelled.

“You cannot tell me which movie to watch or not. But tell me, what is it with this movie that you don't want me to see it?”

He did not answer, not one word.

I passed him and went into the living room. “You better go to bed and try to sleep. You have to go to work tomorrow. You need your sleep. ”

He stood there and calmed down. “Yes, I can go to bed now, you ‘re home. That is all that counts for real anyway.”

The feeling that Thijs was used to check my ways and whereabouts was growing to me that night. I waited till he went to bed. Then I sat down on the sofa wandering about Thijs his anger. His anger was not as in raging anger but more in fearful anger. To me it was clear that he was afraid of something.

I leaned back and laid my head on the sofa thinking what was it about the movie that he did not want me to see?

Keanu Reeves

The next evening I was smoking a joint in my bedroom, away from Thijs to relax. I had turned the lights off, looking at the moon. Then all of a sudden I saw something moving in the wall. I saw light. I looked again, laid the joint down and when I stared at the wall, I saw a body coming out. I recognized right away the face. It was the face of Keanu Reeves, the actor of the movie I had seen the day before with Peter. Then I heard a voice.

“Don't be afraid we are going to meet in the near future.”

All of a sudden the body pulled back and the room was dark again. I sat there thinking to myself what the heck just happened? What bugged me the most was that face of the actor. I did not know too much about him. But there was something else, he looked very familiar. I´ve got the feeling that I had seen that face before.

Arrested for the first time (2004)

Niburu had become a strong adorable dog. However, he had one problem, barking. The barking started one day when he was still a puppy. This was caused by the upstairs neighbor, an old woman. She threw pebble stones at him each time he was in the garden. I caught her a few times and regardless of me warning her, she continued, which caused my dog to bark the moment he heard or saw her.

The end of January 2004, Peter had come to pick me up for a walk with the dogs in the park when the doorbell rang. I opened the door. A policeman asked me if he could talk to me about the dog barking because the neighbor had complained.

“Yes sure, why not,” I answered.

“I am sorry, not here. Please come with me to the office. It is only five minutes from your house. You will be back in a few minutes.”

“No problem. Peter I will be back in a few minutes. Please keep an eye on the dogs.”

Peter looked at me. ”Don't go, I don't trust this at all,” he said.

I didn´t listen to Peter and left with the policeman. When we left the building a police van parked in front of us. When I turned around, I saw two police cars at the other end of the street. I looked at the policeman standing next to me.

“What the heck is happening here?”

I wanted to run back to me house, when five policemen attacked me. They grabbed me and threw me in the police van. I got an injection and passed out.

I woke up in an isolation cell. I was calm, figuring out that yelling was of no use. At first the guards were polite and nice.

Later that day Thijs came in. I thought that he was coming to pick me up; that they made a stupid mistake. But he only came to see how I was doing. He acted surprised when the man told him that I was not allowed to leave, that they needed to talk to me first. They escorted me out of the room where

I had been talking to Thijs. The moment we left the room, they closed the doors on Thijs. I was dragged and thrown in another cell. I got two injections and I passed out again.

The injections and me objecting the injections was the last thing I remembered .

After passing out from the injections, I woke up being interrogated. I noticed that I was sitting on a chair tied to the chair naked. The moment I noticed this, I started to scream at the men who were asking me questions. They looked like the creepy intelligence men, dressed in dark suits, as seen in the movies. They spoke American English, asking me the weirdest questions. “For which organization do you work? Give us the names of the people you work with. Do you belong to the organization of Keanu Reeves? Give us the names of your contacts in America.”

Because I didn´t know what they were talking about, to make them stop beating me, I gave them ridiculous answers. These angered them even more and they started to scream again. Then I felt one hard bang against my head and it became black in front of me. I woke up again at the moment they were beating me in my face.

“Her back tooth, get them out,” I heard one man say.

When I wanted to turn my face in the direction of the voice I was hit with a fist in my face and I had to spit blood.

After that I passed out again to wake up in the cell on the floor. I was naked with blood on my face. My back tooth was gone and my body was bruised like you have no idea.

One thing I realized, I must have been chipped, because they insisted on getting my back tooth out.

I was in the isolation cell for four months. Then they brought me to a psychiatric centre called the “Mentrum” where I was drugged every day.

I didn´t really worry. “Hey a Dutch psychiatric centre, let´s see what they do here,” I thought.

I checked everything, especially what the shrinks were saying. I must admit that I never heard so much nonsense.

Before I was released, the Mentrum shrink asked me if I knew the reason for my suffering.

I told her that I thought that it was a blower psychosis. They believed that I knew. I was cured they said. The shrink stated that I was totally normal, that I had nothing.

Before being released I had to go for one month to another psychiatric centre called SPDC (Social Psychiatric Services Center).

It was clear that the SPDC where they send me to, was affiliated with the Mentrum psychiatric centre. At the SPDC things changed. The shrink, a blond blue eyed very young girl falsified my papers. She claimed that I was a mess and not cured at all. She said that the other shrink at the Mentrum centre had made a mistake. My medication was changed to another drugs-cocktail which really made me sick. I could not sleep any longer, was awake at night and had to start spitting the medications out. But even so, I still was forced by very aggressive males to swallow the pills.

By September I was released. People were totally surprised when I came home. It turned out that some rumors where in the streets about me being dead. Another rumor, that I had wed a Harley Davidson biker and had moved to Los Angeles. The third rumor was that I had moved to a tropical island.

I was surprised and asked the people where they had these rumors from. Some said Thijs told them that I had moved to Los Angeles. Others said that Thijs had told them that I had moved to a tropical Island. While others talked about two man roaming the Westerpark asking people if they knew me. They told them not to believe anything I said and that I was dead. Needless to say this caused strange situations.

I asked Thijs why he said these things about me. He denied everything. According to him, it were made up stories.

I did not trust Thijs, not for one second. There was another thing when it came to Thijs. My relationship with Thijs was a sad story for my first dog. Dzengi hated Thijs very much. He had bitten him a few times. Thijs did his best to make the dog like him, but Dzengi did not trust him at all. This was another reason why I was on guard when Thijs was around. I knew Dzengi. If he did not like somebody, there was a reason.

A Walhalla for pedophiles

After I was released I did not do anything but walk the dog and be in nature as much as I could, which worked as a healing process for my system. By December 2004 I decided to write a book about pedophiles and child abuse.

The above book mentioned by Nathalie is not the book about her life. The aforementioned book only deals with the sexual abuse of children and pedophile networks.

I asked myself how to get more information to write the book. What would happen if I entered a popular forum on the web and talk about pedophiles. What sort of reaction would I get?

I talked about this to one friend abroad. He decided to help me. He entered from another country as RRM (Reformed Robotman). I took over his alias and entered as RRM on the forum called Barbelith forum based in the UK. I started a thread telling that the Dutch state was busy legalizing pedophilia. I pointed out all the Dutch news and political decisions. I posted about taking action against the rape of little children and babies.

Needless to say that I captured the interest of thousands of readers. Together with a friend we posted and reacted nonstop for three days.

On the 4th day the attacks came. Posters trying to divert the minds of the readers and posting warnings for me at an alarming rate. I noticed in the second week that there was one poster who seemingly was following me on the board. The only thing this poster did was asking questions and wanting to know how I knew these things. And I noticed three posters who were very aggressive towards me. Especially when I posted anything about child abuse in the Netherlands.

I backed off after three weeks of posting and making notes to continue with my book and further research.

For unknown reasons I knew exactly how and where to look and what to click open. I was even able to open one FBI file about child abuse with a certain code. I don´t know where I had this code from. It was somewhere

present in my mind. The code was a complicated address with numbers next to the letters FBI. I put the address in Google search and to my surprise it was a file address of the FBI. When I clicked it open I entered a file from the FBI. It showed me a huge massive research into child abuse in New York and surrounding areas. I never had seen research into child abuse that was that immense and so precise. The files reported about the exact time of the day where most children were raped in New York. It showed exactly how many boys and how many girls were raped and in which district children were raped the most. It was so precise that I felt respect for these FBI agents. But at the same time I asked myself why the FBI did not prevent these rapes.

Due to my research I got a feeling that the rape of children was condoned on a global scale.

One day when I was playing with my dog in the park, a dark blue car parked close to where I was waiting for my dog. A man got out and walked straight up to me.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“I am here to warn you.”

“Warn me for what?”

”Don't pretend that you don't know what I mean,” he said.

I laughed at him and asked him who had sent him.

He did not answer. “We will make sure that nobody listens to you any longer” was all he said .

I laughed again. “How will you do that?”

He did not like my attitude and got angry, hissing to me.

“We will start with your dog. Then we will get you and when we are finished with you, nobody will listen to you any longer.”

At that same moment I saw a few Moroccan boys I knew very well. “Hey guys this man is threatening me and he wants to hurt Niburu,” I screamed.

The boys came running towards me and the man backed off. He ran to the car, where another man was waiting for him. He got in the car and they drove off really fast.

I looked at the car driving away and thought fuck all of you! By this action I felt that I was dealing with the military or the Dutch counterintelligence.

Did the threat stop me from further investigation into pedophilia? Not at all.

The year 2005 entered and I felt good. The book was going well. I was writing like a mad woman banging the keyboard nine hours a day. In between, I walked the dog, visited friends and got to know new people who were all against the Dutch system concerning pedophiles.

Like before, I organized meetings to talk about what we as a people could do against the system that protected pedophiles.

In May everybody was shocked. The Dutch government announced a new small political minor party, a pedophile party. They tried to turn the Netherlands into a “Walhalla” for pedophiles!

This new political pedophile party called themselves “The Party of Love of One’s Neighbor and Diversity”. They got the name from the Martijn Association, the most important pedophile group in Europe.

The new political party was backed up by all pedophile groups from around the world. The backbone of the new party was and still is “The Paidika” .

This organization receives millions and millions of euros every year to back up pedophile organizations such as Alice in Wonderland and The North American Man/Boy Love Association (NAMBLA). This is the largest group in the International Pedophile and Child Emancipation (IPCE), an international pro-pedophile activist organization.

The nasty part of this coming out in the news in the Netherlands, was that not one Dutch person took to the streets to protest. This was the big shock for all others who hated pedophiles, including all the victims of child abuse. We wanted to do something. We organized and joined with other groups throughout the Netherlands.

We came close to a demonstration. But our plans were blocked. All of a sudden one after the other got a visit from the police. Five persons were picked up from their work and questioned. They came to me addressing me as the head of the group. They told me that as of now I was not allowed to have more than five persons at the time in my house. They started to follow me everywhere. I received hardcore threats. This caused great fear in many and we decided to stop with our plans to demonstrate. It was just too dangerous.

Programmed to handle weapons

One day Peter wanted to introduce me to a man who had asked him if he knew me. He had told Peter that he wanted to join forces with me. I was curious. Peter made an appointment for the next day.

We went to Amsterdam North which lay opposite of the Central Station across the water. I shall never forget that day. It was the day that I discovered that I am extremely good with weapons.

When we arrived at the apartment of the man we talked a while. I noticed that I was dealing with a former military man. He asked me to join forces with him against the municipality of Amsterdam. Then he got up and asked me to come with him to a backroom.

When he opened the room I was surprised by what I saw. A room filled with weapons, all sorts of different guns and ammunition.

I looked at him. “I see you have connections.” Then I walked to the wall, grabbed a gun and took it apart and putted it back together. Then I took another gun and played with it.

The man looked scared. ”You are a very dangerous person. Where did you learn how to handle weapons like that?”

“Something to do with the military,” I said.

I asked myself, why the heck, does this man need so many weapons for if he only wants to protest against the municipality of Amsterdam.

I had seen enough. I told him that I wasn´t interested to join him. We said goodbye and I never saw that man again.

Peter was very scared when we left the building. “Oh my god, you are a trained soldier.”

“I have no idea,” was all I said. I was very surprised, because I had discovered how handy I am with weapons.

Needless to say that many questions came to me. Where did I learn handle weapons the way I did? Remembering what had happened way back in Switzerland, I asked myself if I had ever killed somebody? Or was there another reason for my knowledge about weapons?

Goodbye to Thijs

One day Thijs was at work when the doorbell rang and the mail delivery man stood in front of my door with a package for Thijs. I accepted the package and opened the box. It turned out that the box was send by his mother. She had been cleaning out their attic and found papers belonging to Thijs .

I am sure that you understand the reason why I looked into the papers. The papers were his military papers. Thijs' name, numbers and codes where on the papers. There were also his pictures from his military days. Thijs had been a professional military man until he got an accident. But he was still a military employee. He was still in service. This made me understand where he got his extra money from every month.

I waited for Thijs to come home. When he entered the living room I was sitting on the sofa. "Thijs we have to talk."

He looked at me and asked me what was wrong.

"You have been a professional military man. You are still receiving wages every month. You´re still a military employee.

Thijs squinted his eyes. "But Kitty cat, where do you get these ridicules ideas from?"

"Don't lie to me you idiot." Then I threw his papers in front of him on the table.

He took the papers and looked at me with paranoia eyes. "Where did you get my papers from."

"Your mother sent them. I know for sure that you have been spying on me."

He tried to play innocent.

"Not true, I am just worried about you, that´s all."

"Don't lie. Peter saw you one day entering the house of the major. What were you doing there? I am pretty sure that you have been spying on me all these years.

Thijs said nothing. Then he went into the kitchen to make his super.

I followed him. “It is time for you to leave. I don't like you anymore. In fact I’m sick of you. I want you to leave.”

He looked at me. “I don't have another house. I need to find one first.”

“Then go and look for a new house,” I sneered at him .

Thijs moved out in September 2005. I had no job, so somebody needed to pay my cost of living. I made a deal with Thijs. He owed me a lot of money. We agreed that he would maintain me until 2010.

A few months later Thijs started to fight for the house I was living in, he won the case. This was due to the fact that he had been paying rent for all these years by this house. So, I switched with Thijs moving into the apartment he had been living in.

Invitations to the United States

In December (2005), all of a sudden I got mails from a certain Victor. He asked me to send him photos of me, telling me that he was a fashion photographer. He sent me “set cards” from models so called proving him to be a fashion photographer. He also tried to lure me into Los Angeles. He insisted that he would pay for the tickets, that it would not cost me a dime.

Victor did also his best to invite me to become a member of “Open Mind Serpo”, a forum based in the United States. All together I received six invitations from him to come to the board.

On the last day of December someone sent me a mail asking: “YSE is this you?” Attached was page ten from a book called *From Transylvania to Turnbridge Wells* from Nicolas de Vere von Drakenberg and a sentence attached to a link: *This is you, know who you are* .

I was surprised because the name YSE was the only name that I really react to. Especially since Vienna when I got my Egyptian trip when I smoked a joint with John.

I opened the link and was surprised by the writings. Almost everything on that page applied to me. Things that happened in my life; especially my ways and my habits.

How did they know all these things? How did they know the name YSE? I only had been using the name YSE on a few boards since the year 2000. Did these people copy my name from one of these boards?

What became very clear to me on the “Open Mind Serpo” forum was that these people had a military background. After some of them started to ask specific questions, I was sure that I was dealing with a military fraction in the USA. These men really thought that they could get answers pertaining to military issues and codes from me. They did not know that I didn´t know the answers to their questions either.

I actually started to play games and send them on a goose chase. I gave them all kind of made-up information, which served them right questioning me like that.

I did not react, just read their postings. By June they started to tell each other how they would love to meet me in real live.

Then, one member calling himself Bruce H. started to send me mails. As a result of what he had read about me on the internet and my knowledge about the making of a pedophile society, he invited me to come to St. Louis (Illinois), where he lived and had a Lumber exploitation company, to do some lectures.

In one mail he so-called confessed to me, that he had been the head of a satanic cult and that he had been involved in satanic rituals. But that he had stopped playing satanic games and left the satanic cult after he had seen the light. He also told me that he had a son called Steve, who was very special to him. Unfortunately his son had a lot of psychological problems.

Because of what he had read on the internet about things that happened in my life, Bruce thought that maybe I could help his son as well. After he insisted that he really wanted me to talk to his son, he told me that he would pay for all my traveling expenses.

I was thinking hard about this invitation. I thought that this was the opportunity to actually see who I was dealing with in the United States. I also knew that I could not be traced by the Dutch counterintelligence who did not want me to leave the Netherlands, if Bruce paid for all the costs.

Suzanne, one of my friends, was with me that day. I told her about Bruce and that he wanted to pay my traveling expenses to come to the United States.

“You´d better not go by yourself. If you want, I will come with you,” she said.

By this my plan started to work. I wrote to Bruce that I am a woman all by herself. “I do not know you. I will not travel by myself.”

Bruce reacted immediately. “If you want to take a friend I will pay for all the costs. Don't worry about money, we will pay for everything.”

I wrote to Bruce that he could arrange two tickets. I also posted on the forum “Open Mind Serpo” that I was coming to visit Bruce and his son. Reactions were explosive. Within that same day I received five invitations, from Dallas to Nevada, Florida and California. I did not accept any of these invitations because for me going to America was only to find out who that military group was.

I got Suzanne her brother to take care of my dog Niburu and we left by the end of August.

The house of Bruce was pretty isolated. No neighbors around at all. There was a road in front of his house, yet you rarely saw cars passing by. Opposite of the house was a huge golf track, totally empty. The whole area had a very bad vibe, it was not normal. What I felt there was a dangerous ground filled with dangerous people, rape and racism was also huge there.

What happened there is way too much to write down.

One day Suzanne needed to use the internet. Nobody was home, so she checked the house in search of a computer. At one point she called me upstairs. She was sitting behind Bruce his computer and had opened his emails. She found something, which caused her to call me as she insisted I had to see it.

Bruce was still the head of a satanic group, but he was also a military man, still working and getting orders to do as he was told. His contacts where mainly military men and organizations. He rented the house from a CIA agent. But that was not the only thing we discovered. It turned out that Bruce had another son who had raped black girls in that area, yet was never sent to jail due to his father Bruce protecting him.

I knew enough and told Suzanne to pack her stuff. “We have to leave this place. It is far too dangerous.”

While we were packing our clothes, Bruce and his son Steve came home. I told him to bring us to the airport. He got so angry that he could not even speak normal any longer. Then he called somebody. “You have to do something, we cannot control her, she is way too strong and dangerous,” he said on the phone.

While I was still packing my suitcases I was thinking about what Bruce had said: “I was too strong and too dangerous”. What did he mean by that?

Then Suzanne came in. “Nathalie, something is wrong, Bruce called some men, they are outside and want to see you.”

She is one of us

Downstairs I saw Bruce and two men. They turned out to be CIA agents. They greeted me politely. “Can I see your passport please?” asked one of them.

I said sure and went inside to get my passport and gave it to him. After having a close look, he smiled and turned to Bruce. “You´d better leave her alone, she is one of us.”

No need to say that I was mighty surprised by what the agent said.

The CIA agents left and Bruce was completely wordless and confused by what the agent had told him .

Steve stood there and did not know what to say either. So I broke the silence. “Steve you are the one who has to bring us to the airport.”

I went upstairs and continued packing. While packing, my thoughts raced through my head: “I was one of them”? What in heaven´s name did they see in my passport? What sort of codes did my passport hold that a CIA agent was able to recognize that I was one of them?

That would explain a lot things if that was true. I remembered that most of the time when I travelled as a fashion model, I was taken out of the line after they saw my passport and I would be able to walk in freely without any control. I knew one thing, the moment I would be back in the Netherlands, I would look into my passport.

These were my thoughts while packing my suitcase. After one hour we left. Steve dropped us at the airport. “I am going to look for my own house, I want to leave my father,” he said. Then he hugged me, got in his car and drove off.

Two months in an isolation cell

The same day I came back to Amsterdam I was arrested by the military police. I came home, put my suitcase down, and put some coffee on, when the doorbell rang. It was the military police. They brought me to the Mentrum psychiatric hospital. This was my second time in this psychiatric hospital.

One of the independent psychiatrists asked me many questions. “You don't have anything. I see no reason to keep you here,” he concluded.

After two weeks I was released. When I went to pick up Niburu from Suzanne´s brother, he told me that my dog was killed. He told me that Niburu was running around and disappeared. Then the police came and told him that the dog was hit by a truck. That was a lie. Later it appeared that the dog had a b ullet in his head. Had this maybe something to do with the threats made earlier by the man in the park?

Three days later I was arrested again and interrogated by Dutch counterintelligence men. They wanted to know what I had done while I was in the United States. They also had questions about certain Arab names I never heard of. They wanted codes from me as well. I started to get used to it, that everyone wanted to have codes, of which I had no idea. As usual, the interrogation led to nothing but me ridiculing them.

After two months being locked up in an isolation cell, I was brought again to the Mentrum psychiatric hospital where they wanted to medicate me, which I refused.

One day when I was making my fruit juice in the kitchen I heard a voice behind me.

“Come with us.”

I turned around and saw several men dressed in black. They ordered me to come with them or else they would force me.

When I started to walk I saw that they had lined up all the employees on both sides of me. They were standing in line to the side all the way from the kitchen towards one of the isolation cells.

In the cell I had to undress in front of these men and lie down on a mattress on the floor. They injected me and I passed out right away. The next day two female workers woke me up.

While I got up, standing on my feet for a few seconds, I passed out again. Two female workers were feeding me with sugar water when I woke up hours later. The upper and lower blood pressure had dropped significantly and they feared for my life.

The next day, after I woke up, the weakness from my body was gone. I called them to get me out of the cell and walked straight to my room. I noticed that they had broken into my room. They had gone through my papers and CD's. What they had been looking for was beyond me.

I stood there looking at my room and the mess they had made .

I started to think about the interrogation and the codes they wanted from me. It became clear to me that the Mentrum psychiatric hospital was used by the Dutch counterintelligence.

After some time I got a new doctor and shrink. One day they called me in to talk with them. It turned out that my dossiers were a mess, that everything was wrong with my dossiers. In fact there was not a real dossier about me. After they asked me a bundle of questions about my sensing abilities, the shrink said that they wanted to talk to my ex. I called Thijs. He had no choice then to talk to them even if he did not want to.

When Thijs was questioned about my sensing abilities, he admitted that I had several psychic powers. He explained that I not only received visions, short intense mental scenarios and strange dreams, but that I also had the ability to perceive future events before they actually happened.

The doctor smiled at me. "Your ex just confirmed what we thought, you don't have anything. You suffer from cryptesthesia, specific heightened abilities, also known as the sixth sense. Everyone is born with a sixth sense. For some it is more developed than others. There is nothing strange about the way you receive messages and information. You receive them through nonphysical methods. After what I have heard and seen, I believe that you have many other powers without realizing it, as well."

After the meeting they told me that I had to leave. "You don't have anything and we will not be used by anybody to play prison wards".

After they threw me out I encountered one huge problem. I had lost my house. When I was locked up, they had blocked me from paying the rent for

my house. The owner was threatening to take all my possessions away as a payment for the time he did not receive any rent .

Then all of a sudden Thijs showed up. He wanted to help me and offered to get my belongings out of the house. I could not do anything while being locked up. So, I had to accept his help.

Unfortunately Thijs did not save my belongings. He took out only my clothes. He left my books, papers, my furniture and many other things in the hands of the owner. Almost everything I had was gone. Including my computer, who had all the information I had brought together about pedophiles and the manuscript of my book.

My mother

Because I had no place to stay, I had to return to Leiden and move in with my mother and try to get some more answers to my questions and about my childhood. My plan was to interrogate her in a polite way.

I called her up, telling her that I was going to move in with her for a few days. I took a cab and went straight from the psychiatric hospital in Amsterdam to Leiden.

My mother smelled strange like a sick person. She ate kilos of meat and smoked two packs of cigarettes every day. She was also a heavy alcoholic. She drank one bottle of port or whiskey every day. All I needed to do to get answers from her was to feed her alcohol. So I did not mind sleeping for a few weeks or even months in the little room on the small guest bed.

Because I had no money, I had to get a job as soon as possible. Thijs had stopped paying me alimony. He refused to pay any longer. I found a job really quick in Haarlem, a city near the beach and only fifteen minutes away from Leiden.

I started to work as an investment broker. Although I never had learned anything about the financial market, to my own surprise, I knew everything about finances .

I had enough time to check my mother. I bought her a bottle of whiskey everyday and paid all her bills. Money was the only language my mother spoke, for money she would do everything. It didn´t take long before she let down her guard.

One day I started to talk about family matters from the past; the funny ones. She loosened up and got drunk. Then I started to ask questions.

“Did you gain weight from me growing in your belly?”

“I can´t remember being pregnant from you,” she replied.

I played naive. “So you were never pregnant from me?”

“I was never pregnant from you,” she repeated.

Then I asked her if she breastfed me while I was a baby. She looked at me with her drunken eyes and laughed. Then she answered without

thinking. “How could I breastfeed you when you´re not my child!”

“Then who is my real mother?”

She froze as if this question sobered her drunken head up. She got up. “I am your mother, what are you talking about.”

From that moment on she tried to ignore me and went to bed early without saying a word.

I left her alone for a few weeks and pretended not to be interested in her any longer. I went to work every day, coming back home late at night. By this routine she calmed down and started to drink even more then she did before.

After one month I was done with waiting and playing games. I started to interrogate her every day for about two weeks. I kept going back to the past. Asking her why there were only three pictures of me as a toddler. Why there were no pictures of me until years later, where I appear on one picture looking very different from the earlier pictures of me.

I also pointed out to her that if my brother was only ten months younger than me, why did I look three years older than him? Why did I look like eight years old and the brother standing in front of me in the pictured looked like he was about five years old? My mother never answered any of these questions.

The Blue Box

As said before I have one memory when I was very young about being hunted with other children in a forest at night trying to escape. They called it the little fox hunt. I also said that I did not know if this really had happened.

Proof that this memory is real I got in when one day I raided the house of my mother. I found a blue box she had been hiding. When my mother saw me holding that box she panicked. She did not want me to open the box. But I did not listen to her.

I opened the box and found a note reading about the fox that escaped. There was also a blue and a white ribbon with the words "For the best fox". These ribbons had also my name on them.

“Tell me, how did you get these things?” I asked.

“It´s the proof that you were the strongest of all,” she answered.

“What you mean?”

She became silent and actually walked away.

In the blue box I also found an unexpected photo of myself. I must have been about four years old. Believe me; this photo has nothing to do with Halloween or a birthday party.

Face painting that points to
Nathalie’s Monarch programming

It´s the same face painting with which Monarch children are painted during certain rituals and special meetings of Monarch children.

If you compare the photo with the face painting, with the toddler photos, given to me by the mother, then you see two very different children. For example the hair is completely different.

The baby and the toddler have fine straight hair, like white people. I have course black hair, like black people´s hair (I n the photo with the face painting my course black hair is covered by a cap).

I took the photo and one of the white ribbons with my initials out of the box and asked my mother for clarification.

She looked at me with an expression in her eyes that I can only describe as fear.

“You should not ask me questions about this because I will never tell you, forget about it. Stop asking me questions.”

She started to look away and told me that she could not remember anything. She became more and more nervous and started to drink more than before.

By spring 2008 I started to fire the questions at her. I asked her what my father meant when he said: “You are not my child, when you get older you must find out who you are.”

I told her that I did not feel any mother daughter connection between us. Reminding her about what she told me when she was totally drunk, that she

was never pregnant from me.

When I asked her where she got me from, she jumped up and ran to the kitchen to get some knifes. Then she came running towards me, holding her hands high with one knife in each hand, ready to attack me. I grabbed her hands, took the knife out of her hands and told her that it was of no use threatening me like that.

“You will never know, I will never tell you, I will take the truth about you with me to my grave,” she screamed. Then she started to laugh hysterically .

After this incident I left the house. I wanted to go to a friend who lived a few blocks from the house of the mother. I never made it. I was arrested by the police. My mother had called them, telling the opposite of the story. She had told them that I had attacked her with knifes.

I was released the next day. The first thing I did was to call Cezar and asked him if I could stay again for a while in his attic in Amsterdam. “No problem at all,” he said.

After I called a cab, I went to the house of my mother to pick up my stuff. Then I went to Amsterdam and moved in with Cezar in his attic for the second time.

It didn´t take long before I found a new job in Amsterdam. It was a clean cut job in marketing just for the money.

The Lawyer

The day I signed in back in Amsterdam, something odd occurred. About five minutes after I had signed in and I left the City Hall, walking to the traffic lights, my phone rang.

“Miss Augustina, welcome back to Amsterdam,” I heard a male voice say.

“Who are you?”

“That is not important. We just want you to know that we know that you are back in Amsterdam.” Then he hung up.

Three days later my sister called me telling me that she had gotten a big fat envelope addressed to me. She had not opened the envelope and asked me what I wanted her to do with it. I told her to send the envelope to me in Amsterdam.

Two days later the envelope arrived. I looked at the big envelope. It had no return address and no mark as to where it came from. My name was a typewritten name on a sticker on the envelope. When I opened the envelope, I found a lot of dossiers. Somebody anonymous was trying to tell me something. The papers clearly came from the City Hall office .

One of the dossiers confirmed that my parents were not my real parents. The father had been telling me the truth.

Another odd thing was that my mother has two identities. She carries the same name, yet each name holds a different social security number.

In the papers I also read how they tracked my ass from the very first day I entered the Netherlands after I stopped working as a fashion model.

When I sat down looking at these papers, thoughts and memories came floating up in my mind. But most of all there were a lot of questions. Who I really was and where I came from became even a greater mystery to me. So I decided to contact a lawyer.

I found a real good lawyer, a man without fear. Thanks to him I was able to get a few answers, but even he bumped into a wall of steel.

My lawyer did his best to get information about me. He contacted the Town Hall, the Ministry of Justice and the Childcare Department (Department of Children and Family Services). He even went as far as asking for police records and the dossiers from the Mentrum psychiatric hospital that had been used to lock me up. The few answers we got thus far were as follows:

First answer from the Department of Justice

We don't know who she is; but we can tell you she was not born in the Netherlands.

To me this means one thing, that they knew who I am, otherwise they could not say "We know she was not born in the Netherlands".

A question from the Department of Justice

Where does she get her Dutch passport from? She is not entitled to a Dutch passport.

Implying that I have another cultural identity, that I was not born in the Netherlands and that I had no right to keep a Dutch passport. However, I always had a Dutch passport. When applying for a passport I never had problems. My passport was always issued without any questions.

My lawyer also found out that I had five different birth certificate papers.

"Those are not official birth certificate papers, they are false," he said the moment he saw my different birth certificate papers. We wondered why I had gotten so many different ones.

My lawyer never received any answer from the Department of Childcare.

The information from the Mentrum psychiatric hospital included only my name, date of birth and my actual address. No dossiers at all were ever sent. Every time my lawyer called them up, they insisted that there were no dossiers about me.

Regardless of all other efforts my lawyer took, he did not get any further answers up to today. All information the lawyer asked for was met with absolute silence. That is not usual in the Netherlands. If a lawyer asks for information, he normally gets the info.

To me all in all I had come to a standstill. I felt that at this point I would not be able to discover more than I had already. I had come to a dead end street. Trying to make a puzzle with missing pieces is extremely difficult. It is impossible to construct a house with missing bricks.

Early 2009 I received the message from my sister that my mother had cancer. The same day I got into a fight with Cezar, whose attic I had been renting. He tried to seduce me and when I told him to stop he became angry and told me to leave.

I needed a solution. So this time I contacted the Mentrum psychiatric hospital myself. I told them that I had lost my house and that they needed to help me as it had been their fault that I lost my house in 2007 .

I supposed that they would love to have me in one of their houses. I was sure that they still wanted those secret codes and other information from me. At the same time I realized that this must be as well the reason why I was still alive.

And I was right. I got an apartment from the Mentrum on the Prinsengracht of all places. I lived there from 2009 till the end of 2010 without paying rent.

In spring 2010 I stopped working. As a result of what I had experienced myself, I decided that it was necessary to rewrite the manuscript about child abuse and rape that I had started in 2004 and lost when I was arrested after I returned from the United States.

Things were going pretty relaxed while I was doing research on child abuse and pedophile networks.

Raped

On Thursday April 28, 2010, Menno, a friend of Peter came by to invite me to a party called “The Oracle Fest”. It turned out that he had gotten two invitations for this party and that they had told him that one ticket was for me. They had asked him to convince me to come to this party.

My first reaction was no. Then he told me that the party was at Ruigoord, a hippy location about 30 minutes from the centre of Amsterdam. It was a remote location with an old Church in the middle. I had heard of this location but had never been there before. My interest was awakened simply because in that same year Buddhist monks had visited Ruigoord to perform some ritual at that location.

“Ok, I will come with you to this party,” I told Menno.

Two days later, on Saturday it was time for the party. A bus was arranged for the guests who were invited to the party. Then something strange happened. All at once the bus was stopped by the police. It turned out that the bus was not allowed to go any further. Everybody had to get out of the bus and walk to the premises of Ruigoord. When I got out of the bus I saw many policemen on motorbikes accompanying a black Audi with black shielded windows. I felt something strange and stood still to look at the Audi. When the Audi passed me by it stood still for one moment. I looked at the windows and felt that there was somebody in the car that I knew.

Menno pulled me by my arm. “Come one let´s go to the church that is where the party is.”

When we arrived at the church I felt something dark like a warning for me not to go in. I stood still but Menno grabbed my hand and pulled me in the direction of the church. When we entered the church I was surprised to see what I saw. The whole church was decorated with heavy expensive Arab carpets. Carpets on the floor and on the walls as well. Many occult symbols were placed everywhere. Then one man came to us and told us that there was a special place reserved for me.

Again I got a strange feeling. When we walked up to my table I saw huge pillows stored against the walls and on the floor. It looked like some old

Arab throne.

“This is reserved for you,” the man told me. He looked at me in such a way that it gave me the creeps.

“What sort of a party is this, who organized this party?” I asked Menno.

Menno explained to me that the party was organized by the coffee shop “The Republic”. I knew this coffee shop. I had been there many times. I had been using the location to meet with people who came from abroad to meet me. To me this had been a safe location. I relaxed and decided to enjoy the party.

The drinks were brought in. It was a fruit punch nice and sweet. I was sitting among many people who all wanted to know things from me. Many spiritual questions were asked. To my surprise for some unknown reason, I was able to answer each question.

The attention of the many people to my person was not normal. I remember this party up to a point where everything became black.

I regained my consciousness waking up outside of the church on a bed in an Arab tent. My hair was a mess, my shoes where gone and my feet were wounded, as if I had been walking on sharp things. When I woke up a man was holding my hand.

“Good you're back. You are so special. You hold the world in the palm of your hands. You have no idea how powerful you are,” I heard the man say. Before I could ask anything, he got up. I noticed that he wore a long black coat and a gray scarf. Then I saw him walk away, straight to the black car I had seen when we had to leave the bus.

When I got up everybody was looking at me. I did not understand why. Then I saw Menno. “Finally you are awake. Come it´s time to go home,” he said to me.

I looked for my shoes. They were gone. Not only my shoes, my wallet and key hanger from Chanel were gone as well.

I looked at Menno. “I don't care that my shoes and other things are gone. I will go barefoot, let´s go home.” I knew that I was drugged at that party. It had happened too many times before.

When I came home I slept almost two whole days. My body had been attacked by the drugs and needed rest.

After I woke up I got so angry and called Menno. I told him to come to me right away because I wanted to talk about what had happened at the "Oracle Fest".

When Menno arrived I asked him what had happened at that party. "Do you know who drugged me?"

"At one moment you were dancing. An American guest was filming you. He also took photos of you while you were dancing. At one point you disappeared. I could not find you. So I went outside looking and asking for you. One girl told me that you left with Keanu Reeves. Another girl told me that she saw you together with a man entering a black limo at the rear part of the church. So I walked to the limo and opened the door. I saw Keanu Reeves trying to have sex with you. I told Reeves to stop what he was doing. Then I pulled you out of the car."

"Did Keanu Reeves try to have sex with me in the limo?"

"Nathalie I am speaking the truth. You were completely drugged out. He had lifted your dress up and his pants were down when I opened the door of the car."

"So he was raping me while I was unconscious?"

"Yes that is exactly what this man was doing."

Later that day Peter came by and I told him what had happen. He looked at me. "So that´s why Keanu Reeves was in town. Some newspapers mentioned that he was in Amsterdam this weekend. It was unknown why Reeves visited Amsterdam. They only knew that he stayed two days at the Amstel Hotel. One TV channel showed a short video when he arrived with a friend at the hotel by car, a black Audi with Dutch number plates. Even through the busy and chaotic traffic in Amsterdam, Reeves was driving the Audi. But that is not so surprising. One journal said that Reeves is a big fan of Amsterdam. It is the umpteenth time that the world star was in Amsterdam. Reeves left the hotel on Sunday afternoon."

After Peter left, I checked the internet to find more on the actor. I found different news reports. One report was from a Dutch journalist who had taken photos of Keanu Reeves in Amsterdam that weekend. The headliner above his article was: *WHAT IS KEANU REEVES DOING IN AMSTERDAM?* "Why does Reeves visit Amsterdam again? Why is he so mysterious? Keanu Reeves and his secret visits to Amsterdam?"

While I was looking into the article Peter called me .

“Nathalie I know somebody who can tell you more about Reeves. He is a painter and we can find him at his exposition. He´s there for sure and you can talk to him. If you want we can go together to the exposition.”

Peter´s friend was a famous Dutch artist called Fabricio. His style is like Picasso on X-TC. I had a long conversation with Fabricio. It turned out that he knew Keanu Reeves from the sex-soirees of Xaviera Hollander, a famous porn queen who lived in the United States for a long time during her Hollywood hooker days. He said that Keanu Reeves often went to these soirees when he was in Amsterdam. When I heard this, I asked him if he knew if Keanu Reeves was in Amsterdam in the 80s.

“Yes, before he got famous he always hung around in the scene. In fact he even lived in Amsterdam for some time when he was younger,” Fabricio responded.

My next step was to check who was behind the “Oracle Fest”. So I went to the coffee shop to talk to the people there.

At the coffee shop they told me that they had been contacted by an American asking them to organize the “Oracle Fest” at Ruigoord. This person paid for everything and had sent the Arab carpets for decoration. They thought that this would be a private party. They had expected around 300 guests. To their surprise 600 tickets were booked from the States and 300 tickets were sold to the United Kingdom. They said that they were mighty surprised when it turned out that among other famous guests, a famous American movie star would tend the party. That was the reason that the police had guarded the limos with the foreign guests.

While they were telling me this, one of the female employees came in. When she saw me she almost got a heart attack. I knew by her reaction that she knew something. I asked her who the guests had been. She looked away and mumbled something. I became very angry and grabbed her by her shoulders .

“Who was at the party? Who were these special guests?

She looked at me. “You really do not remember?” she asked.

“No I was drugged.”

She was silent for one second but then she gave in.

“Keanu Reeves and friends, people from Hollywood and from the music world were the special guests.”

“Keanu Reeves?”

“Yes, he was like the leader of the pack. He was all over you. By the way, you dance incredible well.”

“Is it true that they were filming me and taking photos of me while I was dancing?” I asked.

“Oh yes, Reeves was filming you and following every step you made,” she answered.

I was angry and I felt sick to my stomach. The feeling of being sexually harassed was extremely strong. I left the coffee shop knowing one thing: never enter that place ever again.

I decided that I needed to know more about Keanu Reeves. I went to the video store to see what movies were available. I found several movies, but one called *Babes in Toyland* filmed on location in Munich in the summer of 1986 got my attention. The moment I saw Reeves face on the cover, I recognized him. The way he looks in *Babes in Toyland* , is the way I knew him as the young American boy who had drugged me at the apartment of Jeroen many years ago in Amsterdam. All of a sudden, I discovered that Keanu Reeves was also the one who so often was around while I was working as a fashion model. He was the one that I saw in Vienna and during the summer of 1986 in Munich. In Tokyo he was one of the men visiting the fashion show with the French movie star Catherine Deneuve.

I wondered why I didn´t recognize Reeves before. That I did not recognize him in the *Matrix Reloaded* is no surprise. I didn't know him looking the way he did in that movie. I knew him at a very young age, with long dark hair, without a beard and he had more color on his skin. In his later films he looks rather pale. Yet I kept thinking that I should have recognized him much earlier. I felt sure, that something must have prevented me from recognizing him earlier. I asked myself if for the same reason I never was able to remember the name of the young American.

That night I got flashes and I started to see images from me being called and getting up opening doors dressing up and stepping into limo’s where older men were sitting waiting for me. I started to remember things from my childhood days as well.

I was furious and felt powerless. I had so many questions. I did not know what I could do at that moment. So finally I let it rest and concentrate on my book about pedophiles to finish it as soon as possible.

Pregnant again

A few months passed. The first week of October I felt strange. I woke up with my breasts swollen and I noticed that my belly was swollen as well. It looked as if I was pregnant.

I did not have my period for months. I thought that my period had stopped due to the years of long stress I encountered in this country.

I contacted a female friend and told her that I needed her doctor. Her doctor did a checkup.

“Congratulations, you´re pregnant.”

My heart stood still, I felt numbed and bewildered. “Pregnant! How far am I doctor?”

He told me that I was almost four months pregnant.

I did not had sex with anybody. Then I remembered the rape. When my friend asked me about the father, I lied to her. I told her that I had gone out, met a man and had a one night stand .

For days my mind was occupied with the fact that I was pregnant. For some reason I felt danger for the baby growing inside of me. I had decided to keep the baby; after all it was almost four months old.

In November 2010 I was arrested again by the military police. Again I was brought to the Mentrum. During the interrogation I was warned to stop my research into child abuse and pedophile networks. I told them you cannot stop me. I am writing a book. I have freedom of speech.

They locked me up in the isolation cell for a week before being released into the Mentrum psychiatric hospital. When the shrink tried to get me on medication I refused. They thought they could force the medication on me which forced me to tell them that I was pregnant. Fact is that it was clear to see that I was pregnant by that time. This news blocked them from forcing the medication on me.

For one second I thought that I had won that battle. What I did not know was that they had a plan to get rid of the child.

One night I could not sleep so I left the room, to smoke a cigarette. The night guard yelled at me telling me to go back to my room. I refused. So he called in another guard, an ex military (almost every employee at the Mentrum was an ex military). They grabbed me by my arms and pressed me against the doorpost. That same moment one of them said to the other: “Okay now.” Then they banged their fists in my lower back. I fell to the ground. Then they pulled me into my room and left me on the floor.

I woke up hours later feeling sick and feeling pain. I pulled myself up the bed and passed out. When I woke up in the morning I knew one thing, I needed to go online warning my friends for what they had done to me.

The computers were on the ground floor. I waited until the computer room opened. But before I could open my email box I felt excruciating pain in my belly and I started to sweat and shake. I got up and ran to the toilet. My whole body was trembling. All of a sudden the body of the baby fell into the toilet. I got up and looked inside of the toilet. I tried to take the body of the baby out of the toilet. But whatever I did, I could not hold the body and it slipped deeper into the toilet. I could not get the baby out any longer. I stood there totally in shock. Thoughts raced through my head, was it still alive or did they kill my baby inside of my body. I leaned against the wall and touched the toilet button and heard how the toilet flushed the baby down.

All of a sudden I started crying terribly. I went upstairs telling the staff what had happened, yet nobody believed me. This was and still is the most horrible thing that ever happened to me. For as long as I live shall I remember this day and moment. The absolute hate I felt towards the Mentrum was born that day. What these military employees had done was killing my baby on purpose.

When I confronted one of the men telling him that I would sue his ass for killing my baby, he laughed. “I acted on orders and besides that I have good lawyers.”

The same time I encountered another huge problem. Due to the arrest, I lost my apartment. Before I could even think of starting a case against the Mentrum, I had to find another place to stay. I refused to be homeless.

To find a house in Amsterdam was very difficult and expensive. So I used the killing of my child for blackmailing the Mentrum to get me another house.

My threats worked and I got a brilliant apartment. But it was through a deal that I would swallow pills every day for at least six months, and stop writing my book. I pretended to take the pills, yet I did not, nor did I stop writing.

It didn´t take long before I found another job. It was a brilliant job for a well known company, again in marketing. Once I found the job, I contacted my lawyer. He wanted to go to court for me, but the case was not accepted by the Court of Amsterdam. T hey insisted that if I wanted to sue the Mentrum for killing my baby, I should apply for it myself. They insisted that I did not need a lawyer to talk for me as I was a well known narrator.

The lawyer did not understand the decision of the court. To me it was no surprise. The law system in the Netherlands would never allow me to start a case against the Mentrum because it belongs to a huge organization called Arkin. All organizations in psychiatry, handicapped people, elderly care and junkies, belonged to Arkin. Suing the Mentrum was suing Arkin. Suing them was impossible. It would demand a war budget, which I did not have.

The moment my mother was put to sleep

A few years passed by, without being harassed by the Dutch system or anybody else. My guess was that the Dutch government thought that now that I was working 38 hours a week, that I had stopped working on my book and that they did not have to fear for any actions from my side.

By 2014 the news came in that my mother was in a hospital. She could not be treated any longer. Her cancer had spread throughout her entire body. The cancer lumps could be seen on the outside of her body.

I stayed away from her last waking hours. One of my sisters told me later that she and all who were present the moment my mother was put to sleep, had been shocked by what my mother said just before she died.

“Where is Nathalie? She will never know the truth. She will never know who she is for real. I am taking the truth with me to the grave,” were her last words before she died.

After my mother died, I told my sister to save the hair brushes and some dirty clothes from my mother, so I could do a DNA test. But the same week my sister got rid of all the belongings of the mother. She had called in a company who took all the furniture and clothes with them and burned everything.

After my mother died I started looking for people who had known her. I found out that she had a nephew who lived in Rotterdam. He had lived in with the parents and had a sexual affair with my mother at the time that I must have been four years old.

If anyone knew something about my childhood then it was him. I called him up and we talked for over an hour. He was very glad that he finally was able to talk to me. He told me that when I was a little girl I had walked away and crossed the road. That same moment I was hit by a car. He assured me that I was dead. I was on the floor bleeding all over the place. My father and my mother brought me to a hospital nearby. When they returned, my mother told the nephew that I had to stay at the hospital and that they were not allowed to visit me.

The nephew never believed what she told him because as far as he knew I was dead. After nine months they were called up by the hospital who told them that they could pick me up, that I was alive. The nephew and both the parents went to pick me up. He did not recognize me at all, when he saw me.

“You looked completely different. You were very tall like; you were a child of many years older than the child who died before my eyes. Nat, I never believed that you were the same child, you were much older and you looked so different. You behaved different, you had changed a full 100%,” he said.

I asked him if he remembered the hospital, but he could not. Only that it was a small building, not really a hospital.

He also told me that I kept running away, telling them that I did not know them, that they were not my parents. I also refused to listen to the name Nathalie, telling everybody that Nathalie was not my real name .

When he told me this story, things fell into place. After our long phone conversation I sat down thinking about all the things he had told me. It cleared so many things up for me. I felt extremely calm after the phone talk. It was obvious that they had switched me with their dead child. I was not angry, in fact I was glad about what the nephew had told me.

All of a sudden the strangeness of the photos in the family album made sense. All of a sudden it made sense why I never listened to the name Nathalie. And I realized that my father had been honest when he told me as a child that he was not my father. I knew by this for sure that I was not the child of the parents. I felt relief, at least now I knew that the blood of these two violent parents does not run through my veins.

Finishing my book about pedophilia

By the end of 2014 I was busy with the book, writing the last chapter. I was so focused on the book, that I didn´t notice that a web had surrounded me. One day I went visiting a neighbor and when I came home I got arrested by the police. This time it was the normal police force.

I was brought to the police office to one of the isolation cells. This time they interrogated me about my book. In my book I mentioned a pedophile network active in the Netherlands and Amsterdam with strong ties to other European countries such as France, Italy and Spain. This pedophile network was called the Red Circle group.

The Dutch counterintelligence came in to interrogate me about this pedophile group. Telling me that I was crazy and paranoia and that I was following ghosts. They did their best to try to convince me that the Red Circle did not exist. After one week of interrogation I was put again in the Mentrum.

A trial was fought in court. The prosecutor tried to convince the judge to put a ban on my book and to block the publishing of my book. They insisted that my book was dangerous to third parties. Then they said something which angered the judge. They insisted that it was all invented and based on my fantasy; that I was imagining that pedophiles and pedophile networks exist.

The judge listened to them in silence before she spoke.

“Well then I must disappoint you. My specialties are cases about child abuse. There certainly are pedophile networks,” the judge said. She was angry at the lawyers of the Mentrum. She ruled in my favor and I was released.

I was aware about the fact that the Dutch counterintelligence kept watching me. But this did not stop me from continuing writing my book. To be honest I could have finished the last chapter long before, but every time I found new information I needed to include it in the book.

By July 2015 I used a few codes I had in my head. I typed these number codes into Google to find out what they were. I was shocked when I entered

the darkest part of the world of child abuse and satanic ritual abuses. These websites were clearly for insiders. They were not normal websites. You cannot find them randomly on the web. They are only accessible with the codes I had in my head for some unknown reason. No idea how I got these codes. All I knew is that when I started to use them, I entered a world which is shielded away from the masses. The feeling I got when watching their acts was terrible. Occasionally I got the feeling that similar things had happened to me. It´s an extremely dangerous world out there.

My apartment set on fire

After all these years and the court case against my book, I finally finished the manuscript on the 20th of October 2015. My lawyer warned me to watch out as they did not want my book published. The 21st of October I received threats by email and by phone warning me and telling me to stop doing what I was doing .

On October 22th again threats and this time two men came at my door at around midnight to warn me that publishing my book would have consequences. I laughed them away and closed the door in their faces.

The 23rd of October I went out for shopping. When I came back there were many people in the streets including the trucks from the fire department.

An apartment, my apartment, was burning. I froze and knew that the men who had threatened me the night before were behind the fire.

Investigation showed that the apartment was set on fire by an unknown device. When the police interrogated the neighbors, two young men told them that they had seen a car parking in front of my apartment block. They said that they saw one man stepping out of the car holding what they thought was a gun in his hand. Then this man, went to the window of my apartment and fired a shot through the window. Then he ran back to the car and left. The two young men assured that after the shot my apartment was burning.

So here I was standing in front of my house looking at a blazing fire, realizing that I was losing all my belongings to the fire. Indeed most of my things in the house were burned to the ground. I realized that my enemy really must have feared my book. I guess that their intention had been to burn my house down and destroy everything I had. My book, my research, papers, my computers, everything stored was destroyed by the fire.

Luckily I had a very good insurance. I moved in with nothing into a temporary apartment. By February 2016 I was offered a new apartment and the insurance money was paid. With the money I was able to buy everything I needed for my new house.

2016 was the year where I contemplated, what to do next. I did not mind the loss of anything but my book. It took months before I was able to let it go. There was nothing I could do .

By August 2016 the news reports announced that the FBI had busted the Red Circle pedophile network. They had busted the largest pedophile ring (70.000 members) in history. I could not believe my eyes at first reading this news. They actually busted the same pedophile ring that I had been investigating all these years in the Netherlands. The news read that they busted the ring together with the help of a Dutch man who was the moderator of this ring. Their mean computers were in Amsterdam spreading to France and Belgium as well. They called it the largest pedophile ring busted. Members of this pedophile ring were Royal family members, members of the super rich elite families and many politicians. The FBI made it known that this was just the beginning of busting large pedophile rings.

I was happy because finally something was done. In 2017 another large pedophile ring was busted in Germany (87.000 members).

Those who rule the world from behind the scenes were furious. As a result, the European Union prepared in 2018 far-reaching plans to legalize and normalize pedophilia and decriminalize sex with children across Europe. The principle of a minimum age has been abandoned already by several European countries. In these countries adults are allowed to have sex with children of any age. They will not be prosecuted for rape if the child victim is unable to prove “threat, violence, duress or surprise”.

Final

What did I find out after all these years of being used and hunted? What did all the research bring me?

2016 was the year where I contemplated, what to do next. I did not mind the loss of anything but my book. It took months before I was able to let it go. There was nothing I could do.

Since I started to write this book I learned a few things. Before I had no idea about mind control or the existence of alters, who are capable of fully taking control of the behavior of an individual. I found out that I must have been programmed to be multifunctional since I was a young child. Starting with the lady in white, who took care of me when I was a baby. From my seventh year onwards I was prepared by my stepparents to become a Beta sex slave. Afterwards I was programmed and traumatized by the US military to become a military subject. I also know that I was not born in the Netherlands.

I also know that my parents were not my real parents. I was placed at aggressive abusive pedophile parents. A common practice amongst the elite is to secretly have an important child quietly adopted out to another family. The child then takes on another last name, which hides the genealogy.

If we contemplate the bloodlines of the ruling elite, we will get an impression of their unprecedented power. Every member has his own place in the hierarchy. They draw their lifeblood from around 500 very powerful families worldwide. These families participate at different levels with each other. It is a very precarious case identifying these families. Moreover, because most of them have had their parentage hidden from them. Most of their offspring do not know their real parents. Although many of them are adopted out, the records of what families they belong to, are carefully kept, and their bloodlines hidden by their adopted last names. Many of them do

not know what family they belong to until the leaders choose to reveal it to them.

In 2007 I entered a website called “realityuncovered.net” and started a thread called PSI/Mindcontrol: Question and Introduction by YSE. On the 5th of March 2007 all of a sudden Keanu Reeves, using the name “Resistthem” started a fight and warned me. He told me that my actions would have consequences. He also said that others had come to him to complain about me.

This settled in my brain. I had found out that most movie stars are not only Monarch slaves, many of them are also so-called slave handlers; all live a double life.

Due to what happened to me all these years, I asked myself if Reeves is/was maybe my slave handler. Only the words: "Others would come complaining about me to him" make sense if he was my handler. It meant that others expected him to do something about me. If Reeves is/was my handler then who was the controller? Who ordered Keanu Reeves? Who are these others? And what did these others expect him to do after they complained about me? What is his position when it comes to my person?

What I know is that the Dutch counterintelligence does not like Keanu Reeves and the organization he works for. Otherwise they would have never interrogated me about him. The way they asked questions about this actor showed clearly that he is known by them, not only as a movie star.

I have been warned a million times. They interrogated me many times in the most aggressive ways, yet they did not kill me.

The more I thought about things the less they made sense to me. I started to contemplate and tried to connect things with each other. The only thing I can imagine is that the secret codes they all ask for each time, must be the reason why the Dutch counterintelligence is keeping an eye on me. The same applied to the American military faction. If I add the Arab faction who was around for some time, things become really strange. What all these groups really wanted from me remains a mystery to me.

I know the Dutch counterintelligence still watches every move I make and I also know that they do not want me to leave the Netherlands. Why they do not want me to leave the Netherlands is still a mystery to me.

I do not want things to go on forever. I want to break free. I have been trying to reprogram myself, but this turns out to be impossible because of the alters that protect my programming.

Today I know that occult involvement opens the door to evil spirits. It was wrong to engage with the occult. Today I know that the devil lures people into the occult with all its consequences. My ex husband Thijs was right when he warned me .

To break free I need help, have someone with me to walk through this process of deliverance and become vitally connected with God.

I do not want to be called by the name Nathalie any longer. Reason? I believe that Nathalie is the name of my program; all who used me for sex or to act for them called me Nathalie.

Epilogue

Nathalie continues to suffer with the trauma based mind control in every aspect of her life.

As said in the introduction of this book, there is a major difference between Monarch slaves within the hierarchy and those outside. The abuse and scars of torture on the hierarchic Monarch slaves will not be visible on their physique.

Nathalie has no visible scars of torture. That means that she belongs to one of the highest elite hierarchical families. It also means that she descends from an exceptional bloodline within the ruling families.

As explained in the introduction, according to the ruling families, the power of a human being is stored in the blood. For that reason they explore and accumulate their bloodlines. They seek to capture the power of the most powerful bloodlines around the world. No doubt that this is the reason why different groups and members of the elite have tried to get a descendant from her. This might also be the reason that Nathalie was not killed.

Nathalie´s programming must have been planned before her birth. Her life must have been planned according to a particular structure, from the beginning.

She is physically tough and highly intelligent. She also understands the "Old Arabic" language that is used in the upper occult world. Like other hierarchy children, she must have been conceived during a satanic ritual. Nathalie´s story makes it obvious that occult satanic rituals and demonic entities were used to create alters within her mind.

Nathalie has her bloodline hidden. Hypnotic walls within her mind protect her from knowing where she comes from. She has no recall of her real parents or her childhood. At the age of seven, there is suddenly a foster family and a father who brutally raped and tortured her; preparing her for the Beta programming.

Like all Beta sex slaves, Nathalie was being trained by her father to entertain high politicians. As a small child she was groomed to sexually service the so-called elite within the Dutch political structure.

Nathalie carries horrible memories of different kinds of torture. Nowadays she remembers that on several occasions she had her legs tied and was being dunked upside down into water. As mentioned before, Nathalie has no scars of torture, but due to having her toes wired, some of these were broken. During other events she was brutally beaten so that her dorsal vertebrae suffered lasting damage.

Through memory retrieval and flashbacks (spontaneous visions) she recalls how she has also been subjected to electroshock. This not only took place before she started having flashbacks. It also happened afterwards. She is not aware if this was done to block her memory or to obtain information, specific codes or possible hidden codes generated by her programmers.Nathalie also has been repeatedly hypnotized. She remembers that the Dutch counterintelligence tried hypnosis on her several times to obtain information. The first time this happened, she found out that she was programmed to fake any questioning she is subjected to. She was able to stay wide awake all the time during the time she was under counterintelligence hypnotism.

As you've hopefully learned by now, mind control is a very real science, and is more pervasive in our daily lives than most people realize. Millions have gone through the horrors of this program.

Nathalie´s story reveals to us the ambiguity, not to simply think about the things that happened to Nathalie, but also to find out more about mind control programming ourselves.

Nathalie´s book is a story without an end and it does not cover the whole story either. It will raise questions. It will stay with you and disrupt your sleep for some time.

A soon to be released follow-up will give you answers that might have been raised by the present book. The aim of the second volume will be to give you further information and to explain new facts and later developments.

Two days after publishing her book, Nathalie was incarcerated and confined to a mental hospita l

This book is dedicated to Helmut Kohl, Chancellor of Germany from 1982 - 1998

Helmuth Kohl was one of the kindest men I ever met. The first time that I met him was in 1986. I was booked as the mascot for the CDU campaign in that year. The shooting was done in Vienna in one of the big parks. There were many models and other people booked for the Billboard. They were all dressed in normal cloths, but me. They dressed me completely in red. I had a red long skirt, a red turtleneck cardigan, red shoes and a red barrette on my head with my long hair open. Some photos were shot without the red barrette. The setting was a huge reverse triangle, with me in front of all the other people.

During the shooting there was a big commotion; Helmuth Kohl had arrived. He was a big man with a nice low voice. He looked like a very strong man; secure of himself and without any fear. After he had ordered the security to back off, he walked amongst the people. I was impressed. He was greeted by the people with so much joy. They loved him. I was just standing there, looking at the commotion and how he was talking and shaking hands.

As I was watching him, he turned his head around and I heard him ask for the lady in red. I was the only one in red and I knew he was asking for me. I did not move and saw that they pointed towards me. He turned his head and walked up to me.

“You are very beautiful, no wonder so many colleagues talk about you. Please walk with me. I want to talk to you.”
I realized that he was serious. We walked towards a bench away from all the people. Only his security walked behind us.

“What do you want to tell me?” I asked after we sat down.

“My dear, you do not realize how many men talk about you. Nor do you have any idea who you really are. You are not just a fashion model. You are special. You have to be aware of this.”

“I always take good care of myself. I know men are after me. That is why I always walk away from them. But tell me why did you book me for this campaign? It's so weird. I am the only co-lored model booked for the Billboard!”

He laughed. “Because it is time for change. Many people, especially the Dutch, accuse us Germans of being racist and we are not. We want to show that we embrace all cultures.”

I saw many people looking at us. He squeezed my hands. “We will meet again. Be careful there are many wolves preying on you.” Then he got up and the shooting continued.

I met several times with Helmuth Kohl. We became good friends and I had a few dinners with him when I was in Germany or when he visited his friends in Vienna. He was the only politician who never ever tried to have sex with me. He was the only respectful politician I ever met. He became my Walrus, he was funny, had a good sense of humor and he protected me when-ever he could. He was like a father to me during my modelling years.

The day that I told him about all the strange things that happened to me, he took my hands and said: “You must leave the business, there are too many wolves, it is too dangerous for you.”

The day I told him I was going back to the Netherlands to find out what they did to me as a child and where I come from, he became extremely serious. Took both my hands in his big hands and said: “No don't go back to that country, they will harass you and if you

start digging for your truth they will try to destroy you. Go somewhere else where you will be safe."

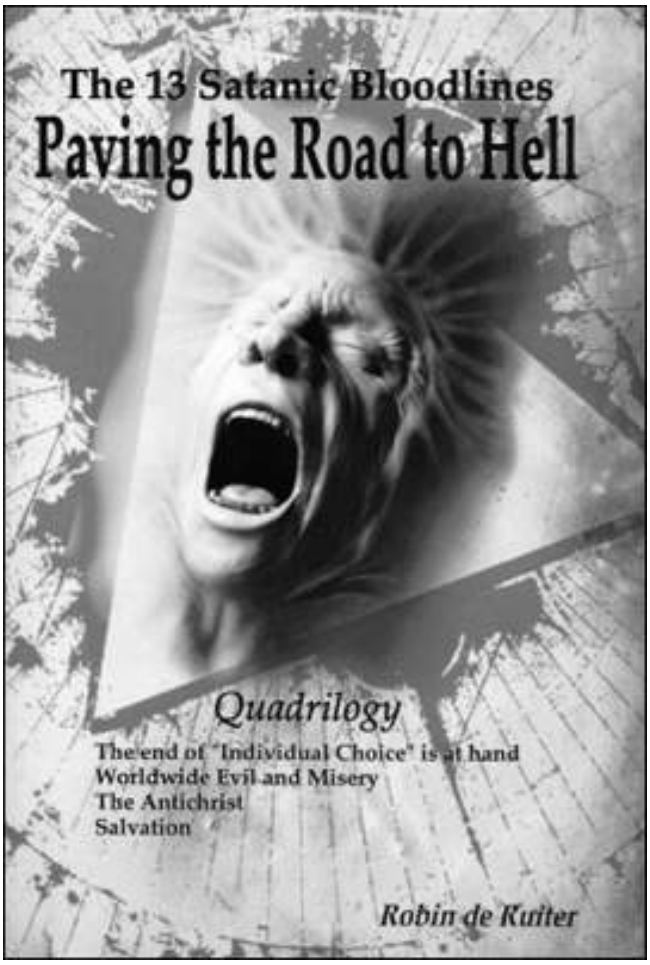
I was stupid and naive I guess; I did not listen to him.

I will never forget Helmuth Kohl. He was a good man, a good family man who loved his wife and the German people very much.

The 13 Satanic Bloodlines

Paving the Road to Hell

Robin de Ruiter



ISBN 9781508776062

The first edition of this book was banned in France

This four-volume book is different from other books on the topic. It was written long before others started championing the need for the masses to wake up to the New World Order agenda.

The first edition did not claim to be into futurism. However, a retrospective view of the events of the last twenty-five years shows that practically all topics mentioned in the book have come to fruition, often in an awesome manner.

Like the first edition, this new updated edition is a very unique publication and reading it will undoubtedly change the way you look at both history and the world today. It completely turns everything on its head. Once you read it, all of a sudden you will see the world around you in infrared. You soon see things which are simply not possible to view with the range of standard vision .

The contents of this book is highly controversial and uncompromising. It describes a monster that we, in all our ignorance, have created together. It also serves to give us an idea of what's in store for the near future, so we can better prepare for what's coming our way.

PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL

We are raised, by tradition, to trust our governments, and are convinced that they care about us. This, however, is a big mistake. Below the surface of official politics lies a complicated social and intellectual process that is taking place.

The visible world leaders are mere puppets directed by an invisible power from behind the scenes. This geo-political power consists of the richest families on this planet. The true aim of this elite group is complete control of Planet Earth. Together with the most powerful multinationals, they rule and control most countries and coalitions.

Behind the scenes there are various hidden transnational Ur-Lodges under the supervision of the ruling elite of which even high-grade Freemasons have no knowledge.

Not only high politicians from the United States, Russia and Western Europe, but also from Israel, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and many other countries are members of these hidden Freemason-Lodges. They are all marionettes whose strings are pulled by our invisible leaders.

Although political leaders on the world stage play opposite roles, behind the scenes they pursue the same goal: a “technocratic world dictatorship”.

Anyone who aspires to pursue a career in politics to reach the top must become part of one of the Super-Lodges. Raising the political ladder is impossible without being part of one or more of these Lodges.

In the Ur-Lodges, our political leaders meet regularly with media moguls, bankers, industrialists and personalities to coordinate and execute the policy of the ruling class.

A world war that has to lead to a world dictatorship is in the making. Terror attacks play an important role in this regard. Some eminent "Masonic Grandmasters" do not agree any longer. The whistleblowers, including Zbigniew Brzezinski (White House Foreign Policy Expert) sound the alarm.

Among other things, they declare that the leaders of al-Qaeda and ISIS are also members of the Ur-Lodges.

Terrorists, politicians and other personalities are all Freemason brothers and conspire with the ultimate objective to have complete control over the world.

This sheds a completely different light on the wars in Iraq and Syria, the millions of refugees flooding Europe and the global terrorist attacks.

Anyone who believes that Muslims are guilty of the terrorist attacks must revise his view.

Religious Dogmas of the Elite

It might surprise you that the ruling elite of this world consider Lucifer to be their only and true god; that one day he will openly rule this world. As long as our global elite believes that Lucifer's ultimate goal is establishing a dictatorial world power, everybody on earth will experience the daily consequences of this.

PAVING THE ROAD TO HELL is also available in Spanish, German, French, Brazilian, Dutch, Serbian, Czechoslovakian, Polish, Croatian, Macedonian, Turkish and others.

Also available as Ebook.

Endnotes

1. In English the phrase “mind control” should be translated as “consciousness control”. One often overlooks the fact that some of the techniques involved, concentrate on the subconscious.
2. Fritz Springmeier interview with a German victim of Josef Mengele. This victim was smuggled via Canada to the United States. Once in the United States, he again had to deal with Josef Mengele, who continued his experiments under a new name, Dr. Green.
3. The existence of two or more personalities within one person is called Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). In specialist literature MPD is also called Syndrome of Multiple Personalities and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID).
4. Ulla Fröhling, *Vater unser in der Hölle* , Hamburg 1996, 18.
5. Once a person has become accustomed to hypnotism, has been repeatedly hypnotized, it becomes very easy for any programmer or slave handler to throw him or her into the trance.
6. Hans Ulrich Gresch, *Unsichtbare Ketten: Der Missbrauch der Hypnose und anderer Trance-technieken durch Kriminelle, Sekten und Geheimdienste* , 2003, 65.
7. Interview with Cisco Wheeler. CKLN-FM *Mind Control Series* , Part 22, Ryerson Polytechnical University Toronto, Ontario. With consent of the producer & interviewer Wayne Morris (1997).
8. Satanic rituals and demonic entities are also used to create alters within the slaves.
9. CKLN- *FM Mind Control Series* , Part 22, Ryerson Polytechnical University Toronto, Ontario. With consent of the producer Wayne Morris (1997).
10. To achieve this, a number of different techniques (manipulation, indoctrination, conditioning, electroshock, hypnotism, encoding, programming and brainwashing) are applied and combined.

11 . Hans Ulrich Gresch, *Unsichtbare Ketten: Der Missbrauch der Hypnose und anderer Trance-technieken durch Kriminelle, Sekten und Geheimdienste* , Hrsg. 2003, 78.

12 . Judith Spencer, *Jenny* : *Das Martyrium eines Kindes* , Frankfurt am Main 1995, 67.

13 . Hans Ulrich Gresch, *Unsichtbare Ketten: Der Missbrauch der Hypnose und anderer Trance-technieken durch Kriminelle, Sekten und Geheimdienste* , 2003, 16.

14 . Heiner Gehring, *Versklavte Gehirne: Bewußtseinskontrolle und Verhaltensbeeinflussung* , Rottenburg 2004, 88.

15 . Electroshocks are basic components of the Monarch program. Stun guns and staffs with hidden electric cattle prods are repeatedly used on Monarch slaves. Electroshocks are not only used to create Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) in the creation of the slave, it is also used to remove memories after a Monarch slave has carried out a mission. Electroshock is used as well to torture reluctant slaves.

16 . Hans Ulrich Gresch, *Unsichtbare Ketten: Der Missbrauch der Hypnose und anderer Trance-technieken durch Kriminelle, Sekten und Geheimdienste* , 2003, 16.

17 . Fritz Springmeier & Cisco Wheeler, *The Illuminati Formula Used to Create an Undetectable Total Mind Controlled Slave* , Clackamas 1996, 166.

18 . The slaves are under such pressure and control that they would inflict themselves with electroshock at the request of their “master”.

19 . Huber, Michaela, *Multiple Persönlichkeiten: Überlebende extremer Gewalt* , Frankfurt am Main, 1995, 27.

20 . Fritz Springmeier & Cisco Wheeler, *The Illuminati Formula Used to Create an Undetectable Total Mind Controlled Slave* , Clackamas 1996, 256.

21 . Ibidem, 333.

22 . Ibidem, 66.

23 . Report of the “Ritual Abuse Task-Force”, Los Angeles, March 15, 1991.

24 . Michaela Huber, *Multiple Persönlichkeiten: Überlebende extremer Gewalt* , Frankfurt am Main, 1995, 27.

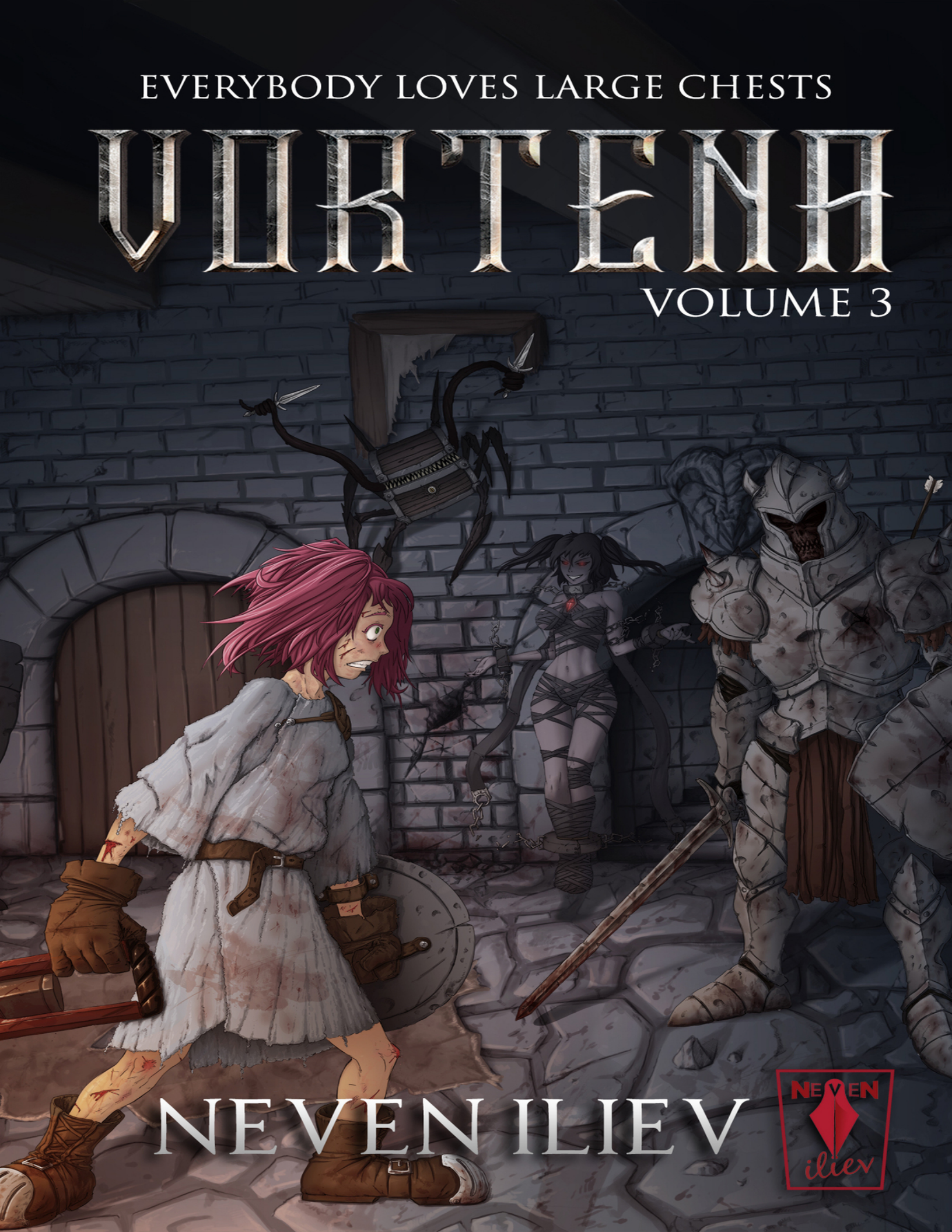
25 . *Katholiek Nieuwsblad* , issue 43, July 21, 2000, 7.

26 . Probably this depot fell under one of the many U.S. Army Combat Equipment Group (CEGE) in Europe.

EVERYBODY LOVES LARGE CHESTS

VORTENA

VOLUME 3



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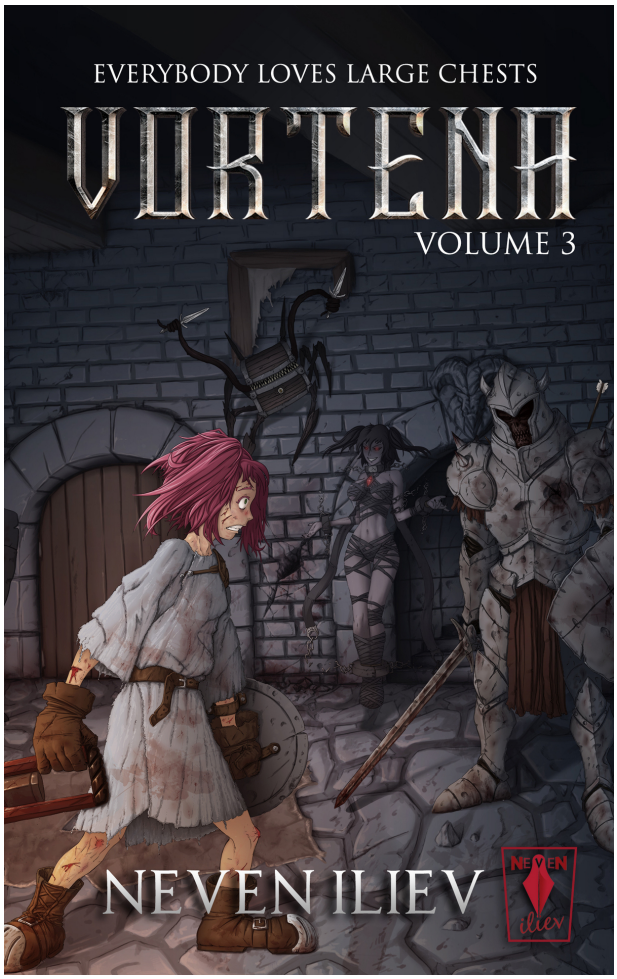
EVERYBODY LOVES LARGE CHESTS
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VOLUME 3
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Everybody Loves Large Chests
Volume Three: Vortena

A book by Neven Iliev

Prologue

Edward Allen, Royal Spymaster to the Lodrak Empire, stood in the extravagant courtyard of the imperial palace, his wizened face frowning intently at a griffin's butt. It wasn't so much that he was looking specifically at the thing's ass, but it was impossible *not* to have the titanic rump in his field of vision. What he was actually focused on was the enormous steel cargo container strapped immediately above said behind. More specifically, at the place where the doors to the giant metal box had been ripped from their hinges and the two empty cages within.

"So. Someone care to explain what happened here?" he asked the subordinates gathered around him.

"Reporting that the prisoner has escaped," the woman next to him stated.

"Brilliant observation, Zone," Edward covered his face with one hand. "I am so lucky to have such an attentive aide that it almost hurts to think about it."

Zone's face remained as expressionless as ever, though a light blush appeared on her cheeks. Praise from Edward was rare, so she couldn't help but be pleased by what she thought were words of encouragement.

"Uh, Zone? That wasn't a compliment," the man next to her rolled his eyes. "He was –"

"Forget it, Bandit," Edward interrupted. "You know she's immune to sarcasm. Or common sense, for that matter."

"Well, forgive an old dog for holding out hope at least one of our merry little band might be normal," Bandit sighed.

"I could probably fix her if you let me."

A hooded man had arrived on the scene.

"Just need a few weeks alone with her and I promise I can make Zone here into the perfect servant."

"Reporting that operative Hook is in immediate threat of decapitation via roundhouse kick," Zone's monotone voice carried a hint of menace.

"Oh, scary, scary!" he said mockingly. "As if that would work on me."

"Requesting that operative Hook update his codename to Hooded Baldy."

"Pffft! Hahaha!"

Bandit, who had been trying to sneak a shot of liquor from his hip flask, spat it out in a fit of laughter.

"Hooded Baldy!" he chuckled. "That fits perfectly! Ahahaha! Aha… Ah, fuck, I just spilt my Volcanic Vodka."

The drink in question was difficult to come by around these parts. One would be hard-pressed to find it even within its birthplace – the Horkensaft Kingdom to the northeast. The dwarves and gnomes of the kingdom were known for their exotic booze, but Volcanic Vodka was special. It was one of the few gnomish-made liquors, though it was an acquired taste rather than a delicacy, which made it even harder to find.

Getting the stuff all the way to the Empire added yet another layer of difficulty, as direct travel between the two countries required one to pass over the treacherous Oculus Sea. It was a massive body of water at the heart of the continent, so named for the eye-like imprint it left on the map. It had once been dry land, but millennia ago the entire region had sunk into the depths of the earth, taking an ancient civilisation or two along with it. A place like that naturally contained all sorts of hazards, from extreme weather conditions and incomprehensible currents to deadly sea creatures.

Suffice to say, if Bandit wanted more of his drink, he'd have to get it himself. Though that would hardly be a problem. The dashing gentleman with black hair was responsible for providing logistical support to the Gilded Hand, Edward's personal spy ring. Some might call his activities 'smuggling' or 'trafficking,' but 'logistical support' sounded much better on paper. He was good at it too, perhaps even the best. It was often said within the organisation that if Bandit couldn't get something, nobody could. Going straight to the Kingdom and back merely to fuel his appreciation for good alcohol was entirely within his capabilities.

"This is my last bit of it, too," he grumbled, putting the flask away. "Gonna have to stock up the next time I have a mission over in pipsqueak territory."

Unfortunately, his responsibilities kept him from taking such flights of fancy.

"If you three are done horsing around, then I suggest you do your blasted jobs," Edward waved his hand. "Bandit, stop getting shitfaced and go put your worthless griffins away."

“Hey now, there’s no need for that,” Bandit complained. “Fluffles and Puff did nothing wrong.”

“Ugh,” Hook groaned. “What sort of Monster Tamer gives cutesy names like those to flying war machines?”

“The kind that will bash your damn head in if you–”

“Hook. Stop antagonising Bandit and contact Question,” Edward commanded. “Fill him in and tell him to wrap things up on his end post-haste; I’ll need him to track down our escaped prisoner.”

“… Yes, sir.”

“Zone, go draw up a map of our route over the Sawblade Mountains. We’ll need to organise a search right away.”

The agents began diligently carrying out the Spymaster’s instructions. Even if they bickered and argued over trivial things, the Gilded Hand was nevertheless a tightly knit outfit. It was Edward’s inner circle, and one didn’t become part of it without proving their loyalty and ability at least a dozen times over. Granted, they were by no means the biggest powerhouses in the Empire when it came to combat, but their influence and political power within both the royal court and the underworld made them a force to be reckoned with.

A specially-designed pulley system soon relieved the griffins of their loads and deposited the boxes on the ground in front of them. Bandit led the creatures back to their roosts while Zone quietly and dispassionately compiled the information that her boss had requested. The ‘hooded baldy,’ meanwhile, contacted their missing colleague with his formidable mind magic. He would have preferred to use his abilities to rip the secrets from the mind of Edward’s captive, but that was clearly no longer an option. Such a shame, too.

He’d never heard a mimic scream before, so he’d been rather looking forward to it.

“Uh, sir? Question says he’s already got an idea what happened to our suspect,” reported Hook. “He says it’s your fault it got away.”

“Of course he does. Though he may actually have a point this time. Come with me, I’m going to inspect the container and I need you and your psychotic brain to try to pick up any residual thoughts.”

“I think you meant to say ‘psionic’ there, sir.”

“I know what I said. Now move it.”

"… Yes, sir."

The two headed inside the slightly wrecked metal box and began their inspection. There were three points of interest there: the broken hinges, the gnome's mangled cage, and the mobile jail cell where Boxxy was supposed to be restrained, yet was currently wide open.

The first of those didn't reveal much information, other than the fact that the doors were very clearly no longer attached to the container. Though the prisoner should not have been able to tear them off with brute strength given the Attributes and Levels it had, there were other ways this could've happened. For example, if that crafty creature had somehow broken the lock, then the doors would've flown wide-open mid-flight. Their hinges weren't designed to handle those kinds of violent air currents, so it would've been only a matter of time before the metal joints snapped.

The real question was: How had the locks come undone in the first place? Hook was unable to pick up any abnormalities around the massive crate's entrance, but Edward spotted some peculiar marks along the floor and walls. It looked as though some sort of highly corrosive acid had been used to eat away at them, but there were no remnants of the liquid left anywhere in the area. The Spymaster was a Level 59 Alchemist, so he was sure that this was not the work of an alchemical compound, but rather something created entirely by magic.

Next was the cage where Cornie Fizzlesprocket had been held. It had been torn into from the outside, almost as though it had been *chewed*. This was where Hook's Psionic Skills kicked in. Called Psychometry, this ability allowed him to perceive the 'feelings' that the object had been subjected to. It had its limitations, of course, but the cage was still 'warm,' so it was no trouble for him to get a reading on its recent history.

"What do you have for me?" Edward inquired.

Hook removed his hand from the mangled remains of Fizzy's prison and stood, brushing the grime from his knees.

"Nothing but fear, loathing, and misery," he replied. "The most vivid images I got were a set of gigantic teeth crushing the bars, followed by a small, pink-haired woman disappearing into them. It cuts off abruptly after that."

"Ah. So, it seems one of our missing persons has been eaten. A shame."

The gnome had been far too big a security risk for Edward to even *consider* letting her go free. The plan had been for Hook to rip the sensitive information from her noggin, after which she would be put to work designing and producing weaponry for the Empire. There were other ways of doing that, of course, but this had been a rare chance to use a master Artificer without the Horkensaft Kingdom's knowledge or permission. Those shorties kept a tight lid on their mechanical wonders and refused any requests from the Lodrak Empire to share those secrets in any way, shape, or form. Even though the two nations were officially on friendly terms at the moment, the Kingdom wasn't stupid enough to lend even more strength to a military powerhouse like the Empire.

All things considered, Edward viewed the gnome's apparent death as a minor footnote. A missed opportunity to do some 'good' for the Empire. In short – a shame.

"You sure about that, sir?" Hook asked. "Typically, a violent death leaves a more… noticeable mark."

"She was gobbled up by a malicious, starving monster. One who wouldn't have even been in our custody if she hadn't turned on it. Frankly, I'd have already written her off as dead even without your Psychometry if it wasn't for the possibility that the Mimic had outside assistance."

"You think someone broke the prisoner out, sir? Mid-flight? At that altitude?"

Hook was well aware that magic could be used to facilitate flight. He himself had one such Spell at his disposal, unsurprisingly called 'Flight.' However, there were limits to the speed and heights one could reach through such methods, and griffins could surpass those easily. Yet Edward appeared to be suggesting that someone had managed not only to intercept them in-transit, but also break the prisoner out without the griffin's senses picking up on such a dangerous individual.

It was by no means impossible, but it *was* highly unlikely, to say the least.

"The evidence would appear to suggest it. See, here." Edward led his subordinate to the back of the container and the remains of the monster's cage. "The control box was shorted out with magically conjured acid."

"Hmm, I seem to remember something about that," Hook said thoughtfully. "Didn't the report say that some of the guards it killed just

before its capture were covered in acid burns?"

"Exactly. It may be a mimic, but our 'friend' can somehow spit caustic fluid. That was why I had it bound with mana-draining shackles. It should have been impossible for it to conjure acid from thin air on zero MP."

"But… it still did?"

"That's what someone wants us to think. See here – the cage is unlocked. *Unlocked.* Not mangled or forced open, and there are no scratches to indicate that it was tampered with. I daresay someone used a key to allow it to escape. The acid is only there to cover their involvement."

"How do you know it didn't slip out of its restraints somehow?"

"Are those eyes of yours just for decoration? Look at your feet!"

Hook immediately realised what his superior officer was referring to. The floor was covered in what had once been viscous yellow mimic blood, but had since dried into a foul-looking gunk with an odd orange-brown colouration. There were also bits of dead flesh and a few metal bolts, which had been firmly glued to the floor by the grotesque residue.

"… Someone carved out its restraints?"

"Certainly looks that way," Edward's voice was grim. "Which is why I want you to confirm what you can with your Psychometry."

"Right. Best get to it, then."

The Psionic stepped up to the cage and gripped two of the bars. He closed his eyes and 'listened.' Monsters were more difficult to read than people since their minds worked differently, so he was expecting to have to dig deep. Yet almost immediately he was assaulted with visions. Images of pure white knives digging into flesh flashed beneath his eyelids, nightmare-inducing screams rang in his ears, and a profound sense of agony stabbed into his brain.

Under the circumstances, it was only natural that he'd scream.

"Fuuuck!" Hook recoiled in shock. "Holy shit, that took me by surprise!"

"What? What did?"

"This cage is suffused with suffering. It's so overwhelming that I can hardly feel anything else."

"Any chance it could've… done this on its own, somehow?"

Hook took a long look at the cage. After a second, he shook his head.

“This is beyond a wild beast chewing off its own leg that’s been caught in a trap. There’s a limit to how much self-harm a body will allow its owner to inflict before their own reflexes and instincts put a stop to it. I can’t imagine any living being capable of inflicting this much pain upon itself. But I’m no expert on monsters, so I wouldn’t bet my life on it.”

Edward carefully considered Hook’s words. Although monsters did follow certain behavioural patterns, deviations and anomalies had been known to occur. But ultimately, the narrative just didn’t fit. Even if his prisoner had had the means and determination to gouge out its own flesh, it wouldn’t have had the MP to disable the cage’s electric field. Even if it could have escaped its bindings, it would have just fallen to the bottom of the cage and been zapped into unconsciousness, then death.

“So, someone else cut its restraints away after all?”

It was the more likely scenario by far.

“Looks that way, sir.” Hook confirmed.

“Can you tell me anything about them?”

“No. Like I said, the agony attached to this thing is so overpowering that I can’t make out anything else. But if I were to offer my professional opinion? Whoever did this made sure it hurt as much as possible, just because he could. A real sick piece of work, to be sure.”

Hook’s words carried quite a bit of weight given that he was the leading expert on ‘special interrogation techniques’ within the Gilded Hand.

“Takes one to know one, I suppose,” Edward mumbled.

Which was a fancy way of saying that Hook was an irredeemable, sadistic bastard who enjoyed torturing people for funsies. His mental methods were far more effective for extracting information, but there were advantages to his more physical practices as well. Admittedly, breaking people through pain and suffering was barbaric, but the Spymaster knew from experience that it was an effective way of making them subservient and obedient. It was something he could always fall back on as a last resort, since not everyone could be coerced through bribery, trickery, or holding loved ones hostage.

In fact, Cornie Fizzlesprocket had been one such person. If everything had gone as planned, she would have been ‘educated’ by Hook to make sure she didn’t get any bright ideas while carrying out Edward’s wishes. She had definitely seemed like the sort of sheltered and naive person that could

easily be controlled through fear and torture, though that was something of a moot point now.

"Hook, get in touch with Question. Tell him everything we've learned and to begin working on tracking down our mystery jailbreaker. After that, inform Mist to start looking into dungeon core extraction techniques."

"Yes, sir. What about the Emperor? He's going to want a report on our progress with the Calamity investigation."

"So?"

"So… what do I tell him?"

Edward had initially instructed Hook to keep the truth behind Boxxy's identity as the likely perpetrator under wraps. The monster they'd been bringing back was supposedly a 'strong lead,' nothing more.

"That's simple. We'll tell him the truth," Edward said. "With the aid of their spies inside the Empire, an elite agent from the Ishigar Republic removed their pet mass-murderer from our custody in order to cover their tracks."

That would surely be more than enough to convince their hot-headed buffoon of an Emperor to not only declare war on the elven nation but also to give his Spymaster more authority and freedom. All in the name of national security, of course. Edward's closest compatriots were, of course, well aware of his plans. They knew just as well as he did that this 'Boxxy T. Morningwood' had no ties whatsoever to the Ishigar Republic.

Or at least, that had been the case prior to the Calamity of Monotal. *Someone* important had clearly taken an interest in the thing for them to dare to snatch it from Edward's clutches so brazenly. But as of right now they had no evidence that the elves were responsible.

"… Uh, sir?" Hook spoke up. "I don't mean to question your methods or whatnot, but half of what you just said sounded made up."

"And?" asked the Spymaster.

"And… how is that telling the Emperor the truth?"

"Come now, Hook. You should know better than to ask that by now," Edward smirked, giving him a light tap on the side the head. "The truth isn't a matter of factual accuracy. It's a matter of perspective and belief. And that gullible moron? He'll see and believe anything that furthers his needs."

Chapter One
Of Gnomes and Monsters
Part One

Fizzy and Boxxy trudged through the woods. It had been five days since their escape and subsequent meeting with Reginald, the God of Impossibility. Right now they were mostly wandering around aimlessly, looking for signs of an undead incursion or some form of civilisation that might offer information. The gnome had already been relieved of her prisoner's rags and outfitted with items from Boxxy's Storage.

She held a steel dagger in her right hand and a small round buckler in her left, although they seemed more like a short sword and a kite shield due to her small stature. A slightly too-large chainmail shirt covered her torso and hung down to her knees like a dress even after Boxxy had shortened it for her. Dark stains dotted the collar, though the gnome was too afraid to ask if they were blood. She had had to fashion her own undergarments using old rags and loose string and a set of old shoes covered her feet, though she had reinforced the toe area with some creative application of metal plates, nails and wire.

All the seemingly-random things inside Boxxy's Storage were like a treasure trove to an Artificer. Fizzy had been understandably surprised when she'd learned of the Skill's existence, but she had quickly grasped its function. It was widely known that high-Level Enchanters and Merchants had access to a similar Skill called Item Box, so the concept wasn't foreign to her. As to why a dungeon mimic would have something like that, that seemed to be somehow related to its chesty heritage.

Regardless of its origin, the pocket dimension had allowed her to throw together some basic clothing, so she wasn't about to complain. Her creations did little more than protect her modesty, but they were still better than walking around wearing an old potato sack. She would've obviously preferred real clothes, but there was a distinct absence of those within Boxxy's hoard. It did contain quite a few Blacksmith-forged arms and armour though, and the ones it had given Fizzy had been chosen based on what it had learned of her Status.

[General Information]
Cornie Fizzlesprocket
Gnome, Female, 22 years old
Member of Erosa Craftsman's Union
Level 56.38 Arclight Artificer
Level 13.85 Paladin
485/485 HP (+0.8/sec)
560/560 MP (+1.5/sec)
[Attributes]
STR 65, DEX 172, AGI 20, END 84, INT 112, WIS 154, PER 141, FTH 12, LCK 7
[Artificer Skills]
Clockwork Expertise – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Explosives Handling – Lvl 6.86
Deconstruction – Lvl 7.33
Optics Expertise – Lvl 4.76
Physics – Lvl 7.04
Component Forging – Lvl 6.63
Tick Counter – Lvl 5.22
Upgrade – Lvl 4.65
[Arclight Artificer Skills]
Electrical Expertise – Lvl 2.32
[Paladin Skills]
Champion of Chaos – Lvl 3.92
Toughness – Lvl 5.23
Strength of Faith – Lvl 2.74
[Other Skills]
Mentor – Lvl 2.43
Dagger Mastery – Lvl 4.15
Shield Mastery – Lvl 3.62

Since her primary Job was the Artisan type, that left most of her physical Attributes completely undeveloped for her apparent Level. Her maximum HP immediately after getting the Paladin Job had not even been two hundred. It really was no surprise her relatives had been taken out so easily if they were this frail. The upside was that her DEX Attribute was reasonably developed, so a piercing weapon like a dagger would do her the

most good right now. She would probably transition to something more suitable, like swords or maybe maces, once her other parameters caught up, but the knife would suffice for the time being.

The shield was to make sure that she didn't accidentally up and die. That wouldn't be funny at all. Shield Mastery also provided her with the END and STR necessary to improve both her conditioning and her max HP, which for the moment was to be her top priority. Dagger Mastery, on the other hand, allowed even a self-proclaimed pacifist like her to rapidly become familiar with that class of weaponry. Both of these Skills were vital to an absolute beginner like her, which was why Boxxy and Fizzy had begun sparring almost immediately after their meeting with the God of Luck.

Well, 'sparring' was perhaps not quite the right word. It would be better to say that the Mimic willingly became the gnome's pincushion for a while. Fizzy had been apprehensive at first, but by the end she had actually seemed to enjoy venting her frustration by stabbing the monster over and over. Boxxy had taken the abuse silently, as it had allowed her to raise her Dagger Mastery to about halfway past Level 2. But – frustratingly – it refused to go higher than that. Still, it was a promising start, in the chest's opinion.

As for Shield Mastery, she simply practiced blocking the Mimic's blows. It had been immensely difficult at first, but she had gotten the hang of it much quicker than Boxxy had expected.

Which was good, because her training was just as difficult for her sparring partner. The murder train that was Boxxy T. Morningwood had only two speeds: walk and kill, and this was the first time in its life it had had to hold back. There was no way Fizzy would survive a full-force blow from the monster even if she could have blocked it. Though the exercises *had* helped the Mimic to learn a little something about controlling its strength, so it wasn't as though it had gotten nothing from their sessions.

But, as with the weapon Skill, Shield Mastery refused to go more than halfway above Level 2. It appeared that there was a limit to what one could learn hitting the same target over and over and that actual combat would be necessary for both Mastery Skills to properly grow. That was going to be tricky, as it meant that the gnome would have to fight for her life for real. The knowledge within those passive abilities had taught her the basics of

using her new equipment, but the monsters in this neck of the woods were still too much for a beginner like her to handle.

Boxxy disliked having to go to so much trouble for such a scrawny morsel, especially considering the part she had played in its imprisonment, but it didn't have much choice. The humans had deprived it of its Warlock Job by force, so it could no longer rely on Snack and Arms for backup. The deal it had made with Rupert, the God of Coincidences, promised to see those Skills and Levels restored, but the lich that it had to kill in order to 'prove its worth' was unlikely to be easy prey. It wanted to do everything in its power to maximise its chances of victory, which meant mentally and physically conditioning Fizzy to become a fighter.

"*Meeeeeh!*"

A hoarse bleating sound cut through the wilderness, interrupting the pair's aimless wandering.

"Oh no… not again!" Fizzy lamented.

That bleat meant two things: they were about to be attacked, and the gnome would have to be put in a 'safe place.' The latter was why the Mimic promptly wrapped the apprehensive gnome in its tongue-tentacles and tossed her into Storage, much to her dismay.

"*Meeeeeh!*"

Another bleat, this one subtly different from the first. It was followed by two more before four humanoid figures leapt from the shadows to surround the half-spider, half-box. These monsters had the horns and hooves of a ram or goat, with the torso and arms of a human. Their entire bodies were covered in thick brown fur, with most of their mass concentrated around their powerful legs. Unsettling yellow goat-eyes sized up the strange creature in their midst, their makeshift bone-tipped spears pointed threateningly at the bizarre abomination.

The monsters were officially known as satyrs, though adventurers and villagers alike preferred to call them goat-men. They moved in groups of three to six and mercilessly attacked anything that wasn't their own kind, at times even fighting and killing each other over petty things like breeding rights. They were really quite violent for a bunch of herbivores.

As for their strength, Boxxy estimated it to be roughly equal to a Level 50 to 60 adventurer, based mostly on their apparent HP and the XP gained by killing them.

"*Meeh!*"

The one with the longest beard gave a sharp bleat and all four satyrs charged the Mimic at once, intending to skewer it with their weapons. This merciless and deadly strategy was what had allowed them to become the dominant monster species in this region of the Sawblade Mountains. Not only magical beasts, but even adventurers and soldiers would find their lives taken from them in an instant by the attack.

However, none of the pack's past victims had been anything like Boxxy T. Morningwood.

Rather than weather their combined attack, Boxxy launched one of its own and leapt into the air towards the one that appeared to be in charge. The satyr had apparently expected this and quickly adjusted the angle of his spear. The goat and the box collided in mid-air, the satyr's weapon piercing the Mimic clean through its midsection.

[You have suffered a deep wound. HP -326.]

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +140.]

Ignoring the wound that would be gone in a few seconds, Boxxy bit deeply into the satyr's shoulders and upper torso with its steel-coated teeth, trapping the beast's horned head inside its maw. They fell to the ground, the toothed box refusing to release its victim.

The other three goat-men approached, attempting to stab the Mimic, but were forced back with a wide spray of corrosive acid. They could only watch in horror as Boxxy chewed mercilessly on their leader, his limbs flailing helplessly as he died.

KACHIN

The sound of metal on metal rang out as the Mimic's jaws snapped fully shut, separating the satyr's head and torso from the rest of his body.

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 43 Mimic! All Attributes +2.]

With their leader dead, the rest of the satyrs were clearly losing their nerve. Being splashed with burning acid hadn't exactly helped morale, either. They didn't quite turn tail and run, but they were visibly hesitant to approach Boxxy. Not that the Mimic had any intention of letting them go. They had made the incredibly poor decision to open the hurt-box, and now they would get what was coming to them.

"*HISSHAAARGH!*"

Boxxy let out a guttural, hissing roar and they shrank back, looking apprehensive. The Mimic brandished its mithril daggers and a steel sword, and proceeded to do educate them on the finer points of bladed weapon combat.

First, it sliced the second satyr's hands clean off, its sword piercing the beast's heart. Using another of its many legs, the Mimic threw the second satyr's spear at the third. It was a poor throw that hit him in the knee with the shaft rather than the tip, but it was enough to make him fall over. Before he could recover, Boxxy swooped in and slashed several deep wounds into his other leg, effectively crippling the goat-man for what little was left of his life.

The Mimic wasn't done with its victim quite yet, though. It proceeded to nail the beast in place, driving its sword straight through the wounded creature's waist and into the soft ground underneath. The satyr struggled and cried, but couldn't muster the strength to free himself from the painful position.

The last of the goat-men turned, presumably to fetch more of his friends, but the Mimic had already anticipated this. It threw a huge rock that caught the fleeing satyr right in the back of the head, knocking him face-first into the dirt. Boxxy leapt onto the creature's back and wrapped a few more improvised limbs around the goat-man, subduing him completely.

All in all, it had taken less than thirty seconds to dismantle the would-be ambush. It was a textbook example of how monster-on-monster conflicts usually played themselves out – quick, merciless, and messy. Two of the satyrs lay dead, another was literally pinned to the ground, bleeding heavily, and the last was held in place under Boxxy's weight.

Now that the situation was under control, the Mimic opened its maw and spat Fizzy out. The gnome fell to the ground with a small thud, gasping for breath.

"Gaah!" she panted, desperately trying to alleviate the tightness in her chest.

The Mimic's pocket dimension was a horrible, claustrophobic space utterly devoid of light, gravity, and – most importantly – air circulation. Boxxy had to fill it with fresh air every time it threw the gnome in there, or else she'd suffocate. Even then, she only had enough air to last her a few minutes, at most.

"*Meeh? Meeeeeeh!*"

The goat-like bleating from the pinned – but mostly unharmed – satyr drew Fizzy's attention. She glanced at the captive monster, her expression pained in apprehension of what would inevitably follow. And indeed, just as expected, a bald, pointy-eared head formed on the box's surface, its tone demanding.

"Kill."

The gnome picked herself up from the ground, approaching the restrained satyr warily. This was already a familiar pattern. She'd known full well that the command would come, but that never made it any easier. In fact, the anticipation before the act was almost the worst part. She screwed up her courage, gripped her dagger with both hands and thrust it into the satyr's neck with a small yell.

[You have inflicted a shallow wound. Target HP -86.]

Unfortunately, it didn't pierce very far. Just enough to cause the monster to wail and thrash, though it stood no chance of escaping Boxxy's grasp.

Fizzy withdrew her weapon and struck again. And then again, and again, over and over. Black blood gushed, flowing freely from the wounds. The satyr howled and bleated in desperation at its growing Paladin-inflicted agony.

The kind-hearted gnome wasn't torturing the creature on purpose, though. She fully understood Boxxy's reasoning and held no real sympathy for the vile beasts, but she still wished that she could at least end the beast's life without needless suffering. Unfortunately, her tiny body simply lacked the necessary strength to sever its life in one clean hit. The satyr's thick hide and dense muscles were difficult to cut into, and it took almost two minutes of abuse before the monster finally died with one last, gurgling bleat.

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 14 Paladin! STR +2. END +2. INT +2.]

The mostly-unwilling executioner gasped for breath, a slightly dazed look in her eyes. The Mimic lifted itself off the dead satyr, going to fetch his crippled friend. It removed the sword from its fleshy sheath and wrapped its tentacles around the goat-man, ignoring the desperate cries of pain as it dragged him along the ground. The poor creature clawed furiously

at the dirt in an attempt to get away, though it was a wasted effort – his arms had no strength left. But the satyr was far beyond rationality; after witnessing the murder of his kin, he was terrified that he would be next.

And he was right. Boxxy brought the struggling creature before the gnome, pinning him to the ground next to his dead friend.

"Kill."

With a sigh, the weary gnome gritted her teeth and did as instructed. It was just as gruesome as the first had been. At least this time it was over quickly since the satyr had already been heavily injured.

Now that all hostiles in the immediate area were dead, Fizzy's face broke into a huge smile. She threw back her head, raising her bloodied hands to the cloudy sky.

"Victory for *CHAOSSS*!"

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 15 Paladin! STR +2. END +2. INT +2.]

[Proficiency level increased. Champion of Chaos is now Level 4. FTH +2. LCK +2.]

Her mad expression vanished in the next instant, returning to the exhaustion of moments ago. Her outburst had been completely beyond her control, a clear sign that the Goddess of Uncertainty had a firm hold over her new 'follower.' Though this sort of relationship between Paladin and patron deity certainly wasn't unique.

Every Paladin started out with a Champion Skill of the divine being he or she had sworn allegiance to. Paladins of Teresa, for example, were Champions of Justice. Paladins serving Axel, patron deity of war and combat, would be Champions of War, while those who worshipped Solus the Sun God were Champions of Life. A Priest or a Monk would have a similar Skill, except that they were Apostles or Disciples instead of Champions.

And of course, each of the Skill variants came with its own set of effects, their main function being to keep the deity's faithful servants from straying too far from their path. At least, that was the tactful way of putting it. A more cynical way would be to say that the gods used these Skills to enforce their worldview onto their mortal servants.

It wasn't nearly as bad as it sounded, though. The divine influence manifested itself as hints and urges rather than overt mind control. It was the same even in Fizzy's case, though she must have been the only Paladin ever to have their Job forced on them by a god or goddess.

Since the poor gnome had ultimately been strong-armed into serving a random, ominous – and supremely unreliable – god like Philip, it was only natural that she would try to reject his particular brand of faith. She desperately wanted the Champion of Chaos Skill gone, hopefully *before* it sent her stark raving mad. The Skill ever-so-slightly warped her perception of the world around her, sometimes giving her glimpses of things that would happen a split second or two in the future.

This was admittedly useful in combat as it allowed her to occasionally predict an opponent's movements, but it also had its downsides. She often had trouble differentiating 'now' from the immediate future. Either that or her limited precognition would prove to be wrong, tricking her into taking actions she shouldn't have. It wasn't something she couldn't get used to, but acclimating to it would take some time.

The real problem she had with the Skill was that it occasionally forced its holder to spout inane phrases, like she had just now. At least this time it had been fairly coherent, rather than drivel like, 'Socks for the Sock God!' or 'Pickles are Yummy Yummy Yummy in my Tummy!'

She didn't even *like* pickles!

Of course, there was a way that she could break free from the God of Chaos. All she had to do was voluntarily undergo a Job Removal. The potentially-traumatic procedure was something that only Royal Scribes of Level 60 and above could perform, and was heavily regulated by the government. Which, incidentally, was why a certain Spymaster had his own personal Scribe. Some Job Removals needed to be kept off the books, after all.

The majority, however, were performed as punishment for violent-yet-powerful criminals with no hope of redemption, though this wasn't always possible. The Scribe performing the Job Removal needed to be at a higher Level than the Job they were trying to take away. Boxxy had been unlucky in that regard, as the two Jobs it had lost had only been at Levels 25 and 12.

On the other hand, one could argue that the Mimic had gotten off easy, as having too many Skills and Attributes ripped from one's being came with

any number of nasty side effects. Individuals who had been forcibly relieved of a vocation at Level 70 or higher did not always survive the process. Those who did often went mad or catatonic, while others were left physically crippled or partially paralysed. And even if their bodies or minds remained intact, their spirits were inevitably broken by a deep depression which ended in suicide more often than not.

Although Fizzy had heard the stories, she was sure that wouldn't happen to her. Her Paladin Job was nowhere near that advanced – plus, she would be *willingly* letting the Job go, so she was at far less risk of suffering any side effects. Except extreme happiness, perhaps. In fact, if anything was making her want to kill herself, it was the Job – and her current daily routine.

"No good," Boxxy said.

The words that the gnome never wanted to hear again put a stop to her fantasies of a better life. Or at least a less-shitty one.

"No good," it repeated. "Still weak."

"Huff, huff, I can't help it!" she insisted, still gasping for air. "I'm a gnome you know! Huff. I don't have a, huff, monster's body like you do! Huff. My people are the physically weakest enlightened on the continent! Huff, huff, huff! Probably even the world!"

Her inherent lack of muscle mass was something that no number of Levels or Attributes would solve, as such things only improved upon one's base physical or mental abilities. It *was* possible to bulk up and gain extra muscle power through a strict exercise regime, but the limitations of race and gender would always be unsurmountable. Even if a gnome like Fizzy had 800 STR, she would still be outmatched by a human with half that amount.

"Not that."

However, it appeared that the Mimic was referring to something else. While it was true that gnomes had a far shorter reach and lacked the raw force of larger enlightened, they were far superior in other ways.

"Your arms are weak, but hands are fast and wits even faster. Sharp eyes, can see blows coming clearly. Reaction time and stamina could use work, but those are easy to fix with practice."

As an expert in the art of murder, it was Boxxy's opinion that gnomes could be just as adept at fighting as any other race, so long as they applied

themselves correctly. And it was precisely *that* that the Mimic had taken issue with.

"Your big problem – you hesitate," it continued. "You care. These are untasty, stupid thoughts. Pointless distractions. They dull the blade and weaken your attacks."

Over the past few days, Fizzy had figured out that 'good,' and 'tasty' were synonyms in Mimicanese. Using said knowledge, she understood the monster's words to mean that the unwillingness with which she carried out its instructions was apparently her biggest weakness as a fighter. But that wasn't as easily remedied as Boxxy seemed to think.

"I can't help it! Until a week ago I was just a girl working on her gadgets! Last month my biggest worry was whether or not I'd be able to find a cheap supply of blast powder! You can't expect me be cruel like you so easily!"

"No. Cruel one is you."

"… What?"

"You hesitate. You cause prey suffering. Should finish quickly. Not tasty if they struggle."

The Mimic had actually meant that last bit literally: it found that prey had the best flavour if it had died instantly, without struggle. But it did – however unintentionally – make a valid point. The gnome's unwillingness to cause pain was, ironically, *causing* her victims undue pain. It really wasn't a question of *if* the creatures had to die – that outcome was practically inevitable once Boxxy had ahold of them. The only thing that mattered was *how* their end would come. That it would be easier on everyone involved if she just got the killing over and done with was something with which Fizzy begrudgingly agreed. Actually putting it into practice, however, was no easy task.

"Alright! Okay, I'll do better next ti–"

"Liar!"

SMACK

A spidery limb slapped her across the face. Which was another way of saying that the Mimic kicked her in the head.

"Aargh!" she stumbled backwards.

"Said that yesterday!"

SMACK

This time it hit her in the stomach, knocking the wind out of her. She fell, unable to even scream, let alone keep her balance.

"Do better *now*!"

SMACK

A downward strike left the faint imprint of her body in the moist soil.

"Not tomorrow!"

SMACK

"Worthless!"

SMACK

"Useless meat!"

SMACK

"Not even good as snack!"

SMACK

"Mercy is for idiots!"

SMACK

"Learn to not care!"

SMACK

It continued to hit and insult her as she curled into the foetal position. She lay there, taking the abuse and quietly whimpering, not even considering fighting back. It would be over soon, anyway. This was just another part of her new daily routine.

The two of them would come across some monsters and Boxxy would decide that they had to die. Fizzy would either be thrown into the dark, suffocating Storage or be forced to fend for herself. If the enemy was a mountain troll, a twin-tailed wolf or one of the enormous strangling serpents, she was required to fight them alone. They were lower on the local food chain and only half as dangerous as the satyrs, but they were still too much for her. Boxxy often had to bail her out and then beat her for her incompetence.

If their opponent was something tougher, like those goat-men or a maybe a pack of hobgoblins, the Mimic would mop them up and leave one or two alive for her to execute. It was all for the sake of raising her Levels, yet she hesitated to hurt them every single time, which resulted in more beatings.

Her diet consisted of whatever prey she had killed, either today or the day before. Luckily, Boxxy had nabbed her mana-fuelled welder from her

shop, so she was allowed to start a fire to grill the monster meat as best she could. Unfortunately, she had no idea what she was doing and had failed to cook her food all the way through the first time she'd tried it, giving herself food poisoning in the process. Another time she had tried foraging for berries, but didn't know which ones were edible and ended up getting poisoned for real. She had recovered from both incidents well enough, but only because the Mimic had treated her with some of its leftover potions and all-purpose antidotes. She'd then been beaten for wasting its limited resources.

It seemed as though beatings comprised about half of her days, now that she thought about it. Boxxy could always find some excuse to hit her. If she was tired from all the walking and fell too far behind, she was beaten for trying to escape. If she slept for over five or six hours, she was beaten for being lazy. If she dared to question Boxxy's methods, she was beaten for being a traitorous worm. The only time she wasn't in danger of being physically abused was when she was thrown into Storage, but that was its own special kind of suffering.

The beatings were so common that she was actually growing somewhat accustomed to the pain. They were also as severe as they were regular, to the point where her END Attribute had risen by three points. This was not a good thing, however, as Boxxy would surely only intensify its abuse should it find out.

"… What Level?"

This day, however, seemed to hold a pleasant surprise for her, as the monstrous chest had cut the punishment short in order to question her.

"Fif-fifteen!" she answered, tears filling her eyes.

"What new Skills?"

"J-just a second, okay? S-s-skill List: P-paladin!"

Just like when she'd reached Levels 5 and 10, she was offered two new Skills. Of course, it was Boxxy who decided which Skills she would take. So far it had 'advised' her to choose Toughness and Strength of Faith. The former worked much like the Mimic's own Natural Armour, though it improved the performance of any and all metal armour the Paladin wore rather than fortifying her hide. The latter allowed the Paladin's melee attacks to draw on the power of their Faith (FTH) Attribute in addition to their STR, with an added bonus when striking the undead. The God of

Chance had indeed given her the best Job to assist Boxxy in their lich-hunting Quest.

However, what would most contribute to their goal was the FTH Attribute, which was why the Mimic was focusing on it. According to her Status, it amplified the effects of Holy Spells while also increasing the likelihood of receiving guidance from Werner in the form of divine revelations. The latter was largely worthless in Boxxy's opinion, but the former was another matter entirely. Purifications, blessings, exorcisms, and healing magic were deemed to be of utmost importance, hence it had forced her to focus on Skills related to that Attribute. It had a hunch that doing so would eventually give her access to such incantations, and it would appear that its guess had been right on the money.

[Holy Scripture]

The gods will graciously share their power and their secrets, but only with those willing to accept them.

Requirements: Level 15 Paladin, INT 40, WIS 20

Type: Passive

Range: Self

[Effects]

Grants knowledge of sacred texts and divine rituals.

Grants knowledge of a Holy Spell at Level 1, 3, 6, 8 and 10 of this Skill.

Increases the effectiveness of Holy Spells by 2% per Level of this Skill.

This kind of Skill was familiar to the Mimic – the so-called 'library' type Skills that bestowed knowledge of magic not otherwise available through one's Job. In theory, one could study and learn the Spells without the assistance of a Skill, but doing so would require time and resources that neither Fizzy nor Boxxy were willing to devote.

[Proficiency level increased. Holy Scripture is now Level 1. INT +2. FTH +2.]

[You have learned a new Spell: Holy Light.]

"Okay!" the abused gnome whimpered. "I learned Holy Light!"

"What does it do?"

"It- it heals the living and burns the undead!"

"Show me."

Fizzy stood and began to chant the Spell, focusing it on herself. But her exhaustion caused her to fumble the words, and the magic exploded in a

flash of blinding light and a weak wave of concussive force. This failure made Boxxy smack her a few times while demanding she ‘do it right.’ The gnome fought back her tears and frantically tried again, this time making sure to follow the arcane formula in her head more carefully. It was actually surprisingly easy once she visualised it as just another circuit.

“Holy Light!”

Her second attempt was successful, and a radiant yellow-green glow enveloped her bruised and beaten body.

[Divine power has healed your wounds. HP +145.]

The light soothed her pain immediately, wrapping her in a feeling of warm comfort that lasted for only an instant.

“How was it?” the Mimic asked.

“I f-feel better now.”

SMACK

“Not you. How much did it do?”

“Hun-hundr– Hundred and forty-five HP…”

“Weak. Did you get Mastery?”

“N-no …”

“Then use it again.”

“Holy Light!”

[Divine power has healed your wounds. HP +145.]

[Proficiency level increased. Holy Mastery is now Level 1. FTH +4.]

“O-Okay! I-I got the Holy Mastery now…”

Just as Boxxy had expected, the first Level of Mastery had been easy enough to acquire. It would hopefully serve as a foundation that would keep Fizzy from fumbling her Spells in the future, at least in theory.

“Cast it again,” the Mimic commanded, and the gnome complied.

“Holy Light!”

“Now?

“Hundred and sixty.”

“Still too weak,” Boxxy declared. “Must level the Skill. Cast it again.”

“B-but I’m already at full HP!”

It then bludgeoned her hard enough to knock her over and stomped on her stomach, dealing a total of 154 HP worth of damage in the process.

“Cast. It. Again.”

Fizzy stood, whimpering, and prepared to heal herself once more. It would seem the tiny Paladin's hardships were just beginning.

Part Two

The black-furred, twin-tailed wolf lunged at its prey, its sharp fangs attempting to bite the small, pink thing in half. It was so tiny it probably could have run upright between the wolf's legs. As a matter of fact, that was exactly what the gnome did to evade the attack. Rather than attempt to best the wolf in a contest of raw physical strength, she dove under its ferocious bite and rolled.

The wolf yelped as something cold and sharp ripped through its leg. It leapt aside to put some distance between itself and the tiny thing, landing a good three or four metres away. It turned to continue the attack, but Fizzy was nowhere to be seen. After a moment of confusion, it once more felt its body being carved into from below. The wolf howled and hopped away again, but the same thing happened a second time. And a third.

Finally, the beast realised that its afternoon snack was somehow able to keep up with it, despite its clearly superior speed. It gave up on trying to move out of the way and decided to simply flatten the offending creature with its weight. After all, it was a tiny thing and looked as though it would squash easily with just a little bit of effort.

Fizzy rolled out from under the wolf just as its massive body came crashing down, missing her completely and landing directly on top of the dagger lodged in the soft dirt. The best whined in agony as its own weight drove the steel blade deeper than the gnome could ever have done by herself.

It was a huge wound, but one that Fizzy could only inflict by effectively disarming herself. That was why she carried another weapon, though it wasn't a backup one. It was far more accurate to say that the dagger was merely the opening act. She reached over her shoulder and gripped the rubberized metal handle poking up behind her. She gave it a twist and a pull to release it from its holding clamp on her back and brought it to her side, holding it firmly with both hands.

She dashed around the wolf's huge body, now right at her eye level. The pint-sized Paladin's eyes and weapon both shone with yellow-green light as she took a wide horizontal swing. The illuminated mace-like object in her hands smashed against the monster's head before it could muster enough strength to pull itself up from the ground.

THONK

[You have inflicted major blunt force trauma. Target HP -246.]

[Proficiency level increased. Mace Mastery is now Level 4. STR +4.]

The wolf yelped pathetically as it collapsed. The blow had cracked its skull and smashed its jaw, but it still clung tenaciously to life. An issue that was resolved moments later when the bloodstained hunk of metal swung down a second time.

THWACK

[You have inflicted major blunt force trauma. Target HP -307.]

[Proficiency level increased. Divine Wrath is now Level 3. FTH +3. STR +1.]

The wolf's head splattered against the ground with a wet, disgusting noise. Bits of brain and blood splashed onto the gnome's face and hair, but she didn't seem to care – or even notice – as she lifted her weapon above her head. She made another downward swing, just to make sure that it was as dead as it appeared.

THWACK

More wolf bits flew everywhere as the monster's head became a bloody pulp. Satisfied with her victory, Fizzy lifted the improvised weapon and wiped it clean as best she could against the beast's fur. As she waited for the magical glow to fade, she inspected it for any new dents or blemishes. The item was not something one would normally consider a weapon, but Fizzy had learned to make do with what she had.

Although not immediately apparent due to all the filth caked on it, the lump of steel in her hands was actually an adjustable wrench. A tool which, much like the rest of the instruments in Fizzy's shop, had been enchanted to fortify its durability. Not that she had ever been able to use this thing for its intended purpose. After all, it was nearly a metre long, far too unwieldy for someone of her short stature to use as an Artificer's tool.

Strictly speaking, it was too large even for human-sized tinkerers. The only possible use for such a thing would require a stupidly large-scale project, and the Fizzlesprockets of Erosa had never been that lucky. In fact, the only reason it was even in Fizzy's Fidgety Widgets in the first place was because it was a novelty that had been gifted to Cornie's father, the original 'Fizzy.'

As to how the wrench had found itself in her possession, Boxxy had simply picked it up when it had looted her shop.

Fizzy, oddly enough, wasn't the least bit upset that she had been robbed blind. In fact, she was glad that her things hadn't been taken by that corrupt asshole of a Spymaster, particularly her father's Lightning Thrower. Boxxy hadn't been stupid enough to give her the weapon outright, but she found solace in the fact that it was still, in a matter of speaking, nearby. The Mimic still allowed her to assemble a few small utility gadgets from the random parts inside its Storage, and now Fizzy had finally found a use for the stupidly enormous wrench. All things considered, the animate chest's hoarding habits had proven to be quite… *tasty*.

After noting a tiny new dent on one side of her wrench, she sheathed it and turned her attention back to the wolf. Grunting with effort, she rolled it onto its side and removed the dagger stuck in its belly. With practiced ease, she began carving up the meat that was to become her dinner, moving mechanically as she did so. Her bruised face showed no hint of squeamishness, disgust, or any other emotion despite being elbow deep in monster guts. Her once bright and attentive green eyes now appeared dull and lifeless, seeing the bloody mess before her as 'just another day.'

The sixteenth day, to be precise.

The sixteenth day after being broken out of Edward's custody.

The sixteenth day since she had effectively become Boxxy's *thing*.

"Good," the Mimic in question commented from somewhere behind Fizzy, its gruff voice sending chills down her spine as usual.

She stopped what she was doing and sheepishly turned to face the monster that she knew could snap her in half at a moment's notice.

"Ah!" she exclaimed with a start. "Aaaah!"

Followed by a wide-eyed scream as realisation struck her.

"I… I… I wrecked its head! I'm so sorry Boxxy! I di-didn't mean to! Honest!"

She started apologising on reflex, as she knew that Boxxy needed the beast's brain intact in order to 'drink up' the corpse. How could she not? By now the murderous box had absorbed nearly seventy corpses right in front of her.

She was at least a little bit glad that this procedure was what the monster had referred to when it claimed to have 'eaten' her father and

brother. The bodies were left as piles of ash and dust, almost as though they'd been cremated. While not a particularly popular funeral rite, nor the one she would have chosen for them, it was nonetheless better than the alternatives. Admittedly that wasn't entirely true since the creature had devoured one of them to check the flavor of gnomes, but its memory of the past had been rather dodgy ever since it lost its Jobs.

Fizzy not knowing exactly what happened was probably for the best. Her new, more pragmatic worldview understood that *something* would have come along and eaten them eventually. It was much easier for her to cope with their deaths if she imagined it as Boxxy sending her deceased family off in her stead. It helped, of course, that both their murderers and the ones who had failed to protect them had paid for their respective crimes against her family.

Overall, it probably wasn't the healthiest way to deal with the loss of her loved ones, but it was all she had given her current situation.

"Please don't hit me!" she pleaded.

"Okay," Boxxy replied.

"R-really?"

"Yes."

The gnome had become a splendidly dirty fighter, in the Mimic's expert opinion. She attacked mostly from blind spots and used her small stature and ability to predict her opponent's movements to her advantage by confusing her target. This was the first time she had managed to bring down such a large creature without taking a single hit, and Boxxy was quite pleased with her progress. She would surely prove herself most useful in the coming battle against the lich if she kept this up.

"Good kill," it added.

"Th-thanks!"

She chanced a weak smile. This was the first bit of actual praise it had given her, so she couldn't help herself.

"Any gains?" Boxxy asked.

"Mace Mastery and D-D-Divine Wrath went up."

"Paladin Level?"

"Still 23."

Fizzy's growth was really quite rapid, but it still felt too slow to the Mimic. It wanted the gnome to reach Level 25 so that it would have the

option of learning the Paladin Job via her Mentor Skill. However, Boxxy was admittedly apprehensive about going through with this. It wasn't sure whether that particular Job was necessarily a good idea.

Its biggest worry was whether or not it would be able to properly raise its Level. After all, both Paladins and Mimics gained Levels by hitting things up close, so it wasn't sure which Job the XP would go to. It wasn't as clear a divide as the Warlock Job had been, since there was a huge difference between blasting stuff with eldritch magic and stabbing it to death.

It therefore decided – at least for the time being – that it would hold off on becoming a box-shaped Paladin. If it needed to amass Attributes, the Cadaver Absorption Skill would provide plenty. Of the seventy-three corpses that it had absorbed since its escape, a total of four had been minor successes, resulting in a combined boost of 39 AGI and 35 END.

But even if Boxxy didn't intend to become a Paladin right away, it still wanted to have the option available. While at the moment it wanted to focus on training its Mimic Job, which had finally reached Level 44, it did intend to look into the Paladin Job later on. After all, the Skills these non-monster Jobs granted their holders were *extremely* tasty. Like, for example, the latest addition to Fizzy's repertoire:

[Divine Wrath]
Empowers the Paladin with holy might so that they may bring down God's judgement on the deserving.
Requirements: Level 20 Paladin, Strength of Faith, STR 60
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 50 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases the effectiveness of Holy Spells and melee attacks by 50% for 2 seconds.
Increases the duration of this Skill by 2 seconds per Level of this Skill.
This Skill may not be activated more than once every 2 hours.

It was a straight-up power boost with no downsides or penalties, aside from the fact that, much like Power Overwhelming, it was a very flashy

Skill. Using it in conjunction with Stealth and Assassination was probably impossible, especially since it was a close-range technique.

It was still an undeniably tasty Skill that the monster would love to get its tentacles on, but unfortunately it came with a caveat: the Champion of Chaos Skill. Limited precognition was nice and all, but that Skill clearly had some sort of external impact on the gnome's behaviour by forcing her to do and say things against her will. Boxxy had already had its mind manipulated once by the dungeon in which it had been born. It had no desire to go through anything like that again.

This Hero business aside, the Mimic enjoyed its free will far too much to give any of it up in exchange for power it didn't technically need.

"S-s-so, what about the, uh, the body?" Fizzy asked meekly.

Had someone been watching, they'd have found it hard to believe that this was the same person who had just killed an opponent many times larger than herself without batting an eye. However, the gnome hadn't remained steadfast during the fight because she wasn't afraid. In truth, she'd been terrified the entire time. Not of some oversized puppy with two tails, but of the mass of violence and teeth that was Boxxy T. Morningwood.

Crack

And, as it turned out, someone had indeed been watching, but had failed to remain silent whilst trying to sneak away. The branch the person had stepped on had produced a weak, barely audible sound some twenty-odd metres away, but Boxxy's Perception (PER)-boosted senses heard it nonetheless. The Mimic dashed off in the direction of the noise, leaving Fizzy momentarily alone as it hurried into the foliage. The gnome dared not move from her spot as she stared at the rustling leaves. Then she heard the screaming.

The very *human* screaming.

Boxxy reappeared several seconds later, its tongue-tentacles wrapped around someone slung over its lid like a bag of turnips. They'd been gagged by a fleshy tendril, but Fizzy could still make out the person's face. It was a very young woman in brown leather armour who couldn't have been more than seventeen or eighteen years old. She kicked, groaned and sobbed as she tried to get away, but her efforts weren't enough to even budge, let alone break, the Mimic's hold. The only thing she succeeded in doing was making tears run in rivulets down her cheeks.

Fizzy steeled herself. This was the first person they'd run into, the first sign of civilisation since their escape from the Spymaster. The poor gnome already knew what was about to happen. The pattern had repeated itself dozens of times already, and it was foolish to think it would stop now. Boxxy brought the human girl before her and pinned her to the ground like it was the most natural thing in the world. Mud stuck to the girl's short brown hair as she flailed, the look of sheer terror on her face one that Fizzy was intimately familiar with.

"Kill."

The order came. Just as she'd known it would. The gnome brought out her oversized wrench, steadying her grip.

"Mmmmph!"

The captive struggled in vain, tears welling in her green eyes as she realised what was about to happen. She stared pleadingly at the pink-haired gnome in front of her. 'Please, save me,' her gaze seemed to say. 'You don't have to do this,' her eyes screamed without words.

The gnome hesitated for a moment. What right did she have to just murder someone? This was someone's daughter. Maybe someone's sister, or perhaps even a wife or a mother. What sort of monster would spread sadness by taking away other people's loved ones? Had this girl done anything to deserve such a cruel fate?

"…"

On the other hand… had her own father and brother deserved to have their lives stolen from them? And whose fault was it they had been taken from her? Who had been responsible for her unjust imprisonment? Had humans ever done anything for her or her family besides ridicule them and make their lives harder for no Gilligan-damned reason?

No, that wasn't fair to the girl before her. She was a total stranger, not at all to blame for what Fizzy had endured. For what she was *still* enduring. However, that also meant that the gnome didn't owe her a single damned thing, and she wasn't about to suffer Boxxy's wrath on some stranger's account.

"Don't blame me for this," she said coldly, tightening her grip on the wrench's handle. "You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

THWACK

THWACK

A swing to either side of the girl's neck ended her barely-adult life mercifully quickly. A twisted smile spread across Fizzy's face and her eyes opened so wide one would think they were trying to escape their sockets. She shrieked, "I have the shiniest meat bicycle!" then reverted to her previous state of fearful misery.

"Th-there, done," she whimpered. "I m-made sure the h-head is st-st-st-still intact. D-d-did I do good?"

"Yes," Boxxy replied simply. "Good."

Fizzy looked on blankly as the Mimic set about absorbing the human as though she was just another piece of meat, but she couldn't say anything. She was astonished by how… easy that had been. It wasn't as though the gnome was trying to downplay or excuse her first act of murder. She knew full well what she'd done, and while she wasn't going to apologise for it, she took no pride in the act, either. If anything, she was strangely indifferent to the whole affair.

This was entirely due to Boxxy's tutelage. The Mimic thoroughly believed that notions like civility, decency and honour were more than simply unnecessary – they were outright detrimental. Such soft and silly concepts were weaknesses, things that dulled the blade and made one take idiotic risks. It couldn't afford to have Fizzy subconsciously hold back at a crucial moment, so it had spent the past two weeks systematically beating those ideas out of her.

In many ways, the naive little tinkerer that the Mimic had met over a month ago was already dead. All that was left in her place was a broken murderer who felt not a single shred of sympathy, guilt, or remorse for her victim. The only feeling she could muster was a vague sense of pity, as if she'd just seen a stray dog get run over by a horse-drawn carriage. The girl's life had been forfeit the moment Boxxy had had ahold of her. All Fizzy could have done was to make sure that her passing was as painless as possible. Which was precisely what she did, having learned her lesson with the satyrs.

This time she had had true conviction behind her blows.

The newbie Paladin vaguely understood that her own life hung by a thread, one that would snap the moment she was deemed too much of a hassle. A ruthless monster like Boxxy would never keep her around unless

she was of some value to it, and she knew that it wouldn't hesitate to cut her down should she try something stupid like escaping.

She probably could at least try to make a run for it. The Mimic was always around, always vigilant, but only when it was awake. It needed to sleep sometimes, and while it kept her chained with those MP-draining shackles during its rest time, getting them off would be simple enough. Boxxy had thoughtlessly given Fizzy access to her tools, and the simple locking mechanism wouldn't stand a chance against a professional Artificer and her trusty screwdriver. She had both means and opportunity to run for the nearest settlement to seek shelter.

But even if she knew where she was going – and she didn't – would she even make it that far? True, she was strong enough to take down a twin-tail wolf, but that was small fry around these parts. A group of satyrs or hobgoblins couldn't possibly fail to kill her if they were to cross paths, which unfortunately seemed more likely than not. Not to mention that Boxxy could run much faster and much farther than her, making it impossible to escape should it give chase.

But the fear of death was not the only thing holding her back. Should a miracle occur and Fizzy finally find herself free of Boxxy, what would she even do? Her life in Erosa was over. There was nothing waiting for her back there but an empty house that had no doubt already been cleaned out by the Spymaster's goons. She was most likely also a wanted criminal by now, with a bounty and a wanted poster and everything. Even if she were to defy death a dozen times over and reach civilisation, she'd only be thrown in prison again.

Bottom line, Boxxy was the only being on the planet who even remotely appeared to give a damn about her. True, the monster abused her constantly, but it wasn't all bad. It had taught her how to defend herself, made sure that she was fed and clothed, and watched over her at night – even if she wasn't allowed nearly as much sleep as she would have wanted. Besides, this was very much a temporary arrangement, though that in itself was hardly a fun thought.

Eventually, Fizzy would cease to be useful to the creature. Maybe in an hour, maybe a week, a month, or a year, but it would definitely happen. And when it did, her life would be extinguished. It seemed like the most logical, the most inevitable, the most natural way that this twisted relationship could

possibly end. The only way to delay that inescapable outcome was to keep making herself useful to the Mimic, convince it that there was value in keeping her around.

Initially, she'd clung to the foolish hope that if she held off on escaping long enough, something might happen. She dreamed that someone might kill the beast and save her, but now she knew better. Even if they came across an adventurer capable of taking it down, it would not end well for her. After all, Boxxy was exactly the type of spiteful asshole that would rather destroy its playthings than allow them to be stolen.

And so the gnome had largely accepted the fact that her life would end much sooner than she would've liked. She wasn't about to expedite the process, but she saw no other way out.

At the very least, she refused to be like the girl she'd killed, flailing pathetically in ignorant terror. She refused to die by a random twist of fate, a bad roll of the die, or an unlucky coin toss. On the inevitable day when Boxxy finally decided to finish her off, she wanted to die knowing *why*.

Why she had to live.

Why she had to die.

At that moment, her solemn introspection was rudely interrupted by an annoyingly familiar voice. Not the one that whispered in the back of her mind, but one that spoke clearly and loudly as if it were giving a sermon.

The concept of luck, chance, chaos, whatever one wishes to call it, is a false one. A convenient lie that beings capable of thought use to comfort themselves in their ignorance. In truth, there are innumerable underlying circumstances and factors behind every seemingly random act. Each outcome, both hypothetical and actual, can be traced back to a singular point of origin, a simple decision or event that set things into motion. Yet at the same time, free will sees to it that no model, no matter how complex or accurate, is truly flawless. That no matter how hard one tries to predict the future, the most anyone can ever hope to produce is an educated guess.

But it is only through such understanding that one can hope to bend fate to their will, to bring about the outcomes they desire and avoid those they deem unacceptable. To understand and unravel the threads of causality is the duty and privilege of all who seek to comprehend this wonderful puzzle that we call a world. For it is only once we can see the strings that we may ask to have a word with the puppeteer.

I have high hopes that you will be more than just another doll dancing to a tune you cannot even hear, Champion Fizzlesprocket.

P.S. You will find the lich if you go north-by-northwest along the mountain foothills. Look for a whole lot of dead and/or dying trees and you'll know you're in the right place.

P.P.S. You should really dye your outfit something else if you get the chance; rust isn't really your colour. Something in green, perhaps.

[You have received a divine revelation from the Goddess of Gambling. FTH +10.]

Boxxy continued to rummage through the girl's belongings, unaware of the lengthy message that had just been delivered. As for Fizzy, she wasn't particularly pleased to have had her all-too-rare moment of contemplation ruined, though she had at least gotten something useful in exchange. She and Boxxy finally had a direction, and she'd even received a bit of extra FTH to boost her magic. While she didn't much care for that flowery, needlessly cryptic speech, she did have to admit that the God of Coincidences had raised a very good point:

She would look pretty damned good in green.

Part Three

A monster and its pet gnome trudged along the old dirt path. They'd been heading northwest along the Sawblade Mountains, following the latter's divine revelation. Boxxy had naturally refused to blindly believe that Fizzy would suddenly know where their target was, mostly because it wasn't aware of what oracles were or whether they were tasty. To avoid incurring the monster's wrath, she had invented a vague excuse about being able to smell the undead from afar. She had no idea whether Boxxy believed her or not, but it had nevertheless decided to follow her suggested direction. It was marginally better than aimlessly wandering around hoping to get lucky, after all.

However, that had been several days ago, and Boxxy was starting to seriously doubt whether the pint-sized Paladin was telling the truth. While mimics were by and large a patient species, it was still irritated that they'd wasted so much time on this little adventure. The obscure time limit on its all-important Quest was a serious concern, as there was no telling when Clarice might get bored and decide to terminate their arrangement. The Goddess of Probability seemed like an exceptionally fickle deity, so the Mimic couldn't help but feel agitated by all this blasted walking.

Admittedly, the two had done more than just walk. They had fought many monsters and even taken down a gang of mountain bandits. Fizzy was honing all of her new Skills after having finally reached Level 25 of her Paladin Job, while Boxxy was now a Level 46 Mimic, bringing it ever closer to its next Rank Up. The previous one had broadened its horizons significantly, so it couldn't wait to see what tasty treats the next stage of its evolution would bring. The problem was that that particular checkpoint seemed impossible to reach before the Quest's indeterminate deadline.

However, that *wasn't* because it was sharing its XP with the pink-haired gnome it was currently 'looking after.' While its Mimic Level would certainly have been a good bit higher otherwise, it needed more than just a Level 50 Mimic Job to Rank Up. It also needed a Level 10 Shapeshift Skill, and *that* was proving to be the real problem. Training that ability had been getting harder and harder, to the point where it was currently stuck at Level 9. The monster would remain a Greater Mimic no matter its Level unless it found inspiration for new and exciting things to sculpt from its flesh.

Shapeshifting wasn't a craft that could be honed purely through mindless repetition or frequent killing, after all.

Speaking of killing – why were there so few edible things in the area? Boxxy had sensed it vaguely earlier, but it was now certain that there was a distressing absence of prey in this region of the mountain. Its question was answered several minutes later when the surrounding terrain began to change rapidly with every step. Vegetation became more and more sparse until the area was practically barren. The grass and bushes had all dried up, and the few pine trees around were reduced to nothing but bare, rotting trunks. A significant number of them had fallen over, unable to bear their own weight. It was as though the soil itself was spreading death, accompanied by the pungent stench of rot wafting on the breeze.

"Fizzy!" Boxxy called.

"Y-yes, Boxxy?"

"What is going on here? Everything looks extremely untasty!"

"Th-that's probably because of the Blight."

"Oh… What's a Blight?" it asked flatly.

"It's an undead disease. Or rather, *the* undead disease. It saps the life from the living and bolsters the walking dead. Where there is Blight, there is also undeath – the two are inseparable and grow exponentially over time as they feed off of each other."

The Mimic contemplated her words.

"So… Blight creates zombies, zombies spread Blight, which creates more zombies and spreads more Blight?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Oh. That feels like cheating."

Fizzy nodded.

"It is, yeah. There's an entire continent that has been c-c-claimed by it, actually. The former homeland of the giants, once known as Percepeia, is now referred to as 'the Blighted Lands.' It's said the undead plague is s-so thick over there that even those with divine magic just fall over dead within hours."

"Hrmmm," the box grumbled ponderously. "You sure seem to know a lot about it for a mushy meat-thing who never left city."

"Y-yeah. M-m-most of that stuff came from the Holy Scripture Skill. Apparently, Paladins are frequently c-called upon to fight the living dead,

so…”

“So how come my dungeon didn’t have this Blight thing?” Boxxy inquired. “There were nasty undead, but I don’t remember there being any bad stuff in the air.”

“I, uh… don’t know. Maybe dungeons follow different rules? They create life out of nothing so maybe there’s no Blight with ‘fake’ undead?”

“Mmmrrrh,” the Mimic grumbled, making Fizzy shiver at its rising displeasure. “But, can clean Blight as Paladin, yes?”

“Y-yeah! Holy magic can cleanse the land and water to get rid of it,” she hurried to confirm.

“Then won’t we run into Empire people cleaning this place?”

“Uh… maybe? I don’t think anyone knows there’s a Blight infestation in this remote part of the Sawblade Mountains yet. Subduing this thing would be a large-scale operation that would probably take, like, hundreds of people. You’d notice that many people around.”

“But won’t it spread to the humans and call them over while we’re doing the Quest thingy?”

It certainly wouldn’t do to have humans meddling with its plans, especially if there was a chance of that terrifying Spymaster arriving on the scene.

“N-no, I doubt it. Blight doesn’t exactly… move that fast.”

Even if the undead *had* conquered an entire continent, the disease had taken over a century to envelop it completely. It wasn’t a poison that killed quickly, but a persistent malady that drove its roots deep into every millimetre of soil it claimed. It wasn’t the sort of thing that could cover an entire town overnight. And even if the infestation were reported, the Lodrak Empire currently lacked the resources to deal with it. Any government-employed Paladin, Priest, Druid, or Shaman with the Skills to cleanse the land of the undead plague was already busy trying to keep another disaster in check. While the Blight was assuredly dangerous, the baffling toxins released by the Calamity were a far more immediate concern.

But Boxxy wasn’t aware of that. The only thing it had to go on was the word of a frightened gnome. It decided, however, that there was a reasonable chance she was telling the truth, seeing as the place she’d led them to was indeed crawling with the undead. Not to mention that it had spent the past few weeks systematically beating any sort of resistance out of

her. It had been sceptical at first, but it was hard to deny the truth – especially when it was barrelling towards them down the gravelly slope.

The growling, hissing thing looked like a troll, similar to the ones Boxxy had fought in the forests around Erosa, but with two key differences. Though the creatures shared similar apelike physiques, this thing was a fair bit taller, and far more decomposed. Bits of its flesh were missing entirely and what was left of its body looked foul, rotting and crawling with maggots. It was an undead being no matter how one looked at it, though it appeared that reanimation had done little to curb its habits. Especially the one where it travelled in packs, if the five similarly ghoulish creatures behind it were any indication.

The Mimic was familiar with trolls and their stupidly thick hides and rapid healing abilities. It was also fairly knowledgeable about fighting the undead. After all, it had killed many of them during its assault on its home dungeon. It knew that zombies, skeletons, and spectres didn't feel anything, whether it be pain, fear, hunger, or exhaustion, so hacking off a limb or two wasn't nearly enough to stop them. Admittedly, their capability for rational thought had rotted away along with their brains, but the fighting instincts and, more importantly, Skills they had possessed in life remained largely intact. It was safe to say that undead monsters were far more dangerous than their living counterparts, so Boxxy prepared itself for a violent scrap.

It was then kindly reminded of the existence of the tiny Paladin that it had been dragging along.

"Holy Light!" chanted Fizzy.

[Your holy magic has purified the undead. Target HP -367.]

[Your target has been weakened for 6 seconds.]

A bright, yellow-green light enveloped the zombie in the lead. Black smoke burst from its body, turning bits of its already-rotting flesh to dust. A chunk of its torso and thighs disappeared, causing its left leg to snap off at the hip. The monster toppled to the ground like a stack of bricks, but it wasn't finished quite yet. It kept crawling towards Fizzy, though its movements had clearly grown more sluggish.

"Holy Light!"

The troll's right arm and shoulder vanished, but it kept clawing at the ground as though it were trying to bite her ankles off.

"Holy Light!"

The third Spell did the trick, completing the large, ape-like zombie's transformation into a smouldering pile of white ash.

"I-I-I-I did it!" Fizzy shrieked in glee.

It was her first time fighting an undead and it had been a smashing success. It hadn't even managed to get near her! In fairness, though, this outcome was hardly a surprise. All monsters possessed an elemental weakness, commonly referred to as their Bane. Being struck by it would not only deal significant damage, but often crippled the creature as well. And given that the Bane of all undead was divine magic in any form, Fizzy's victory against a single grunt-level zombie had been fairly certain.

She still felt elated, though.

"Boxxy! Look!" she pointed at the troll's remains. "I did it! I–"

"Shut up and help, stupid thing!"

In her excitement, she'd completely forgotten that they'd run into a *group* of zombies. She might have taken one of them down, but Boxxy had moved to intercept the other five.

"… Oh, right! I'm on my way!"

She snatched up her wrench and dashed towards the fighting. The trolls had surrounded the Mimic, but the agile spider-chest was hopping about, easily avoiding their clumsy attempts to claw and bite at it. It probably could have taken their attacks and let its Mend Flesh Skill heal the damage, but there was no reason to get needlessly hurt. Pain, while necessary at times, was by no means tasty.

Fizzy barged into the scuffle, using her wrench to bash one of the creatures across the back of its knee. The limb made a disgusting snapping sound as it bent at a weird angle, forcing the creature to fall forwards. The Paladin climbed onto its back, chanting her next Spell and trying not to think about the squelching coming from underneath her.

"Consecrate!"

A ring of holy energy spread outwards, enveloping the zombies. It flowed into the soil beneath their feet, causing a gentle light to seep from the cracks in the dried-up soil.

The temporary holy ground would work in the opposite way the Blight did – by bolstering the vitality of the living while sapping the strength and speed of the undead. Boxxy took advantage of its enemies' sudden weakness and went about beheading three of them while Fizzy crushed first

the kneecaps and then the heads of two more. Their victory was so swift that they barely needed half of the twenty seconds that Consecrate's effects allocated them.

"Fizzy," the Mimic called.

"Heeek!" the gnome squealed. "W-w-what is it, B-B-Boxxy?"

"Good job," it simply said.

The Paladin had finally shown that vaunted anti-undead prowess that Jerome had talked about. Granted, Boxxy probably could have handled things on its own, but it would have taken far longer. And since the Mimic expected to have to fight more and more undead as it approached the lich, it needed to ensure that its victories were fast, efficient, and easy. Merely reaching its target was going to be a gruelling enough task, and the snivelling gnome would have surely failed already had it not been for the unspeakable training regime it had been putting her through.

"No hesitation, no fear, just action," it added. "Attention span could use some work, but still – good job."

"Th-thanks Boxxy!" she replied, a quivering smile on her face.

And the training had certainly worked, though perhaps not in quite the way that the Mimic had imagined. Fizzy was still very much a scaredy-cat, and she'd been practically shaking in her boots the entire time, though not because of a few silly zombies. She'd been scared shitless of displeasing the chest-shaped mass of murder, which she found to be far more terrifying than a bunch of walking corpses. The fact that she hadn't disappointed Boxxy and thus might not receive a beating today was the best news she could have hoped for.

"Where to now?" the Mimic asked.

"…"

Fizzy's already-weak smile disappeared in an instant. Panic gripped her, as responding truthfully with 'I don't know' would surely result in yet another vicious beating. And though she could heal herself now, that served merely to prolong Boxxy's 'lessons.' Her tired green eyes frantically surveyed their surroundings, looking for something – anything – to divert the violent creature's attention. Thankfully, she spotted that something almost immediately.

"There!" she shouted, pointing into the distance. "There's a wuh-wuh-white tower over there! The li-lich is probably inside!"

Boxxy directed its gaze to where she was indicating and could indeed spot the tall, pearly-white structure in the distance. It sat atop a mountain ridge, the surrounding area grey and Blight-stricken. The pale tower stood out against the dreary background, but it was so far away that from this distance it looked smaller than a grain of rice. The Mimic would likely never have spotted it, had the gnome not pointed it out. Looking that far ahead – whether it was figuratively or literally – was not a habit it possessed.

"I see," it responded. "Okay. Let's go."

Fizzy sighed in relief and followed. She offered a silent prayer of thanks to Murgatroyd that Boxxy had bought her wild guess, though it hadn't been a *completely* unfounded one. There was nothing but barren, dead land for kilometres around the tower and liches were supposed to be powerful, intelligent beings. It would make sense that the thing would want to hole up in a place like that rather than rough it in the barren wastelands.

They made their way towards the tower, the walking a familiar constant after three straight weeks of nothing but. Now, however, they were attacked much more frequently, fighting off an average of four packs of zombified beasts an hour. Thankfully for Fizzy, her now-much-higher END Attribute allowed her to continue marching onward without exhausting herself too much. She'd also learned that using Holy Light as an offensive Spell wasn't worth the effort. It was far more efficient to use Consecrate to weaken the entire group, then pummel them to paste with some good old-fashioned elbow grease.

However, another enemy reared its head as they made their way into the heart of the dying land – the disease itself.

[Your body has been weakened by Blight.]

[Automatic HP recovery has been reduced by 2.6 per second.]

[Stamina recovery has been reduced by 30%.]

Boxxy was more or less fine thanks to its abnormally high HP recovery, but Fizzy was not so lucky. The degenerative condition overpowered her body's natural healing abilities, causing her to slowly wither away as they walked. Holy Light would alleviate the ailment and temporarily restore her vitality, but it was a stopgap measure at best. Using Consecrate would cleanse the air and land around her and stave off the Blight's effects, but she didn't have the MP to cast the Spell every few paces.

There was also the matter of provisions. While Boxxy could simply snack on a carcass or two from its Storage, Fizzy had it much rougher. She was carrying her own food and water, which had become contaminated from prolonged exposure to the Blight. The once-crystal clear water in her waterskin was now brown and murky, while the dried meat had gone way beyond bad. It was basically dirt by the time she had attempted to actually eat it. She was also fairly certain that she had seen the grilled flank twitch in her hand as if it were trying to reanimate itself.

It took them the rest of the day to reach their destination, which left the pint-sized Paladin thoroughly exhausted, both physically and mentally. Not only had she been denied both rest and sustenance, but she'd had to help Boxxy fight off at least two hundred undead. She was dreading the trip back, but at least took solace in the fact that the Mimic seemed satisfied with her performance. Assuming, of course, that her earlier guess had been accurate.

The stone tower ahead of them was roughly seventeen metres high and seven metres in diameter. It stood on the mountain ridge ahead of them, making it the highest point in the entire Blight-covered area. The setting sun had dyed the white bricks red, highlighting the few tiny windows on its upper floors.

Both Fizzy and Boxxy recognised the structure. It looked exactly like the tower back in Erosa's courtyard – the very same building where the Mimic had had its Jobs stripped from it.

This was no coincidence, as the organisation known as Arcaneum always used the same blueprints when building their research outposts, and this one was no different. The ruins of a short stone wall could be seen around the tower, as well as the remnants of what appeared to be a few wooden houses and shacks. Part of the courtyard was separated by what had once been a sturdy wooden fence but was now little more than a line of debris. It had probably been a place for the settlers to grow crops or maybe keep farm animals, but there were no such signs of life anywhere to be seen.

The monster and the gnome cautiously approached the tower through a large gap in the outer wall. Seeing the ruined settlement up close momentarily caused Fizzy to ponder their quarry's circumstances. Had the

lich they were after once been a magical researcher here? Or had it only stumbled upon this place by chance?

She quickly dismissed such pointless thoughts, mentally preparing herself for what would doubtless be a brutal fight. She followed Boxxy closely as they approached the tower's entrance, where the only thing remaining of its once-impressive double doors was a set of empty hinges.

The pair headed inside warily with their weapons out. The entrance hall was a large, open room that took up about half of the ground floor. The off-white stone walls and wooden floorboards were mostly bare, save for a picture frame with a ripped canvas hanging from the former and a few moth-eaten rugs covering the latter. The only piece of furniture in the place was a wooden dining table that had been snapped in two and left to rot in the corner. The air was heavy with dust and the stench of rotting flesh, the latter likely caused by the various decomposing remains strewn about the place. A trio of empty archways beckoned from the wall opposite the entrance. The left and right led into smaller rooms, while the stone staircase beyond the middle arch allowed access to the next floor.

Clank-clank-clank

Heavy, metallic footsteps sounded from the rooms toward the rear of the tower. Fizzy gulped, readjusting the grip on her improvised mace in apprehension of what was to come. Three humanoid figures emerged almost simultaneously from each of the doorways and stepped into the fading day's light that flooded in from the open entrance behind her. They were clad head-to-toe in blackened full plate armour that was covered in spikes, rust and scratches. Though it looked ancient, it was nevertheless intimidating, not to mention thick enough to absorb anything the gnome's feeble arms could throw at it. Through their open-faced helmets Fizzy caught a glimpse of their rotten faces, bits of skull showing through the random spots where the flesh had fallen away completely.

These undead were clearly different from the ones outside. Not only their armour but also their weapons made that abundantly clear. The one in the middle bore a huge greatsword that was nearly as long as he was tall, while the other two carried large, heavy shields and chipped longswords. A simple look at the way their armaments were held was enough to determine that they were not mere decorations, but tools of war that their wielders were clearly familiar with.

These beings were Death Knights, a type of undead that was typically born from the corpses of skilled warriors who had died in battle against their own kind. They occasionally showed up in dungeons or places where especially bloody battles had taken place, but the vast majority of the time they were *created*. And indeed, judging from their rock-steady stances and loose attack formation, they were definitely not mindless corpses that charged at every living thing in sight. They had a master, an owner.

One who apparently was not above personally greeting 'visitors' to their domain.

"So, you're the one who's been making all that noise out there, hmm?"

A cold voice dripping with malice echoed through the old tower. That was when Fizzy finally beheld the lich she and Boxxy had been looking for all this time. It seemed to walk calmly down the stone staircase, but a closer look revealed that that was not exactly the case. The lich did not walk, it *floated*. Not to mention that 'it' was quite obviously a 'she.'

The lich had the appearance of a human woman in her early twenties, her shoulder-length black hair tied in twin side-tails. The creature's face was surprisingly beautiful, except for the sickening pale purple color of her skin and the glowing red irises floating amidst her pitch-black eyes. A thick metal collar was clamped around her neck, matching the shackles that bound her wrists and ankles. Ghostly chains dangled from her various bindings, fluttering like loose threads in the breeze despite the ominous rattling noises they were giving off.

As for the rest of her womanly figure, it was wrapped in a series of ragged bandages that were either dark blue or gray – it was hard to tell in the dim lighting. The wrappings did not show off a lot of her putrid-coloured skin, but clung tightly to her body in a way that left little to the imagination. The cloth also tied her feet and ankles together in a way that would have made walking impossible even if she were to take off the heavy-looking shackles.

However, the most eye-catching part of the lich was the enormous gem dangling from her neck to nestle between her shapely breasts, blazing with a crimson light that matched her eyes.

Those same eyes now sized Fizzy up, almost as though she were trying to taste her.

“What, a gnome?” she remarked in a patronising tone. “You can’t be serious!”

“I-I-I-I-I’ll have you kn-know! I’m a P-P-Paladin! I’m not afraid of some stinking undead!”

Fizzy tried to put up a strong front, but it was a pathetically weak attempt. The sheer disgust she felt looking at the thing that had once been a living woman made her skin crawl in a way she never would have thought possible. It wasn’t quite as bad as the near-crippling terror a displeased Boxxy could inspire, but it was still its own unique blend of awful.

“Oh, a Paladin. How droll,” the lich rolled her eyes. “Let me guess, you’re on some sort of righteous mission to slay me, are you not?”

“W-Well … Y-y-yeah. I am, actually!”

“Hah, typical. This is why I never liked you religious types. Always with the–”

Metal flashed in the darkened room, interrupting her rant before it had even begun.

[You have suffered a devastating blow. HP -942.]

[Your undead constitution has prevented you from being Stunned.]

[Proficiency level increased. Physical Nullity is now Level 3. END +12.]

“SHREEEEEEAAAAAAA!”

She let out an unearthly shriek, even though her kind were supposedly unable to feel pain. Her apparent agony wasn’t enough to stop her from turning transparent in the next instant as she fled from whatever it was that had just stabbed her in the back. Another mithril dagger swung at her as she retreated, but it passed harmlessly through her body as though she were a ghost. She drifted through her Death Knights, putting them between herself and the enemy she’d failed to notice, then turned to face her attacker, only to see a plain-looking wooden treasure chest. Granted, one that stood on eight giant arachnid legs and held two white daggers with a pair of red tongue-tentacles, but a chest nonetheless.

Boxxy had activated Stealth and scuttled to the side the instant the lich’s minions had entered the room. Not even Fizzy had noticed its disappearance as it prepared to ambush its target.

The Mimic had been fairly certain that the lich would respond to the intrusion of her territory, and when she had, it had taken advantage of her distraction to employ its Level 9 Assassinate Skill. Unfortunately, despite

the devastating attack, it had failed to strike her down. And now that the lich was painfully aware of Boxxy's presence, there would be no chance of ambushing her again.

As for the lich herself, her pained expression was quickly replaced by one of absolute shock.

"You… YOU!"

Which then gave way to a look of pure rage that turned her otherwise attractive features ugly enough to match her personality.

"You, *again*?!" she shrieked. "How many times! How many times do you have to kill me before you're satisfied! You stupid fucking box!"

Distracted by what should have been an impossible meeting, the lich had momentarily forgotten that there was a second intruder.

"This is all your fa–"

"Holy Light!"

"AAAAAAAARRGH!"

Fizzy's magic enveloped the undead woman, transforming her tirade into a scream loud enough to deafen everyone around her. Her temporarily transparent body dissipated into mist in the next instant, melting away without a trace. The three Death Knights that were still lined up and awaiting the order to attack crumbled to dust, signifying that their master had indeed been slain.

The tiny Paladin collapsed to her knees, gasping for breath.

"Huff, huff, huff! Yeah! Take that!"

Fizzy had never thought that she'd meet anyone as terrifying as Boxxy, and yet there she'd been. The sheer malice emanating from the lich-woman had been enough to freeze her in her tracks, but the Mimic's reappearance had broken her out of her stupor. If not for that, or for the fact that Boxxy's sneak attack had already caused the lich heavy damage, Fizzy would almost certainly have ended up as one of her servants.

"Get up," Boxxy commanded.

Those words startled Fizzy, as she hadn't even realised that it had gotten so close to her.

"Ah, right!" she exclaimed, scrambling to her feet. "We should get out of–"

"Have to find the lich."

"… Huh? Wasn't that her?"

“Maybe. Maybe not. Quest not done yet.”

“… Alr-alright, Boxxy. Wh-wh-whatever you say, Boxxy!”

The thoroughly-abused gnome didn’t even bother asking for its reasons. If the Mimic said jump, then she would already be in the air before the question of ‘how high’ had even popped into her head. Otherwise she risked having her ribs broken and her jaw dislocated. Even so, she couldn’t help but want to ask one thing. She knew it was a bad idea, but the part of her that thirsted for knowledge was too loud to ignore.

“Uhm… B-B-B-Boxxy, did you know th-that woman?”

The lich had seemingly recognised the monster, which, all things considered, was in no way a coincidence.

“Yes.”

Thankfully, the shapeshifter refrained from hitting her and answered her question in typical Boxxy fashion. Concise and to the point, with no additional information or context. Fizzy was therefore forced to ask the obvious follow-up question, but she figured that it was probably safe to do so.

“Who… who was she?”

“Someone I killed. Long time ago.”

Indeed, this had been the second time that the Mimic had brought about that woman’s demise. Granted, the first time that it had killed her had been so long ago that it felt like an entire lifetime had passed since then. And yet it remembered her. How could it not? That particular kill had been rather… memorable. Her body had been the last thing that it had eaten before setting out to leave its birthplace behind, at a time when it was still being influenced by that dungeon.

A time when the Necromancer known as Valeria Vortena had still been human.

Part Four

After defeating the lich, Boxxy and Fizzy set about searching the tower. Despite having killed what had appeared to be an intelligent undead being, the Quest remained unfulfilled, which Boxxy interpreted to mean that they'd gotten the wrong target. Seeing its old prey come back to 'life' like that was surprising, but it didn't have the faintest idea how or why the woman had returned. Nor did it care. She had been an obstacle to be removed, nothing more. Therefore, rather than worry about the un-undead, it decided to focus its attention on looking for traces of its actual objective.

The box-and-gnome pair began their search on the ground floor. It was just an empty space, including the back rooms where the Death Knights had come out from. This had probably been some type of reception area at one point, or maybe a guard post to keep unwanted visitors away from the upper levels. Regardless of its past purpose, it currently held no answers, so the duo moved higher.

The first three floors were separated into a collection of dorm rooms, closets, pantries, and meeting rooms – enough space to comfortably house fifteen to twenty people. The third floor also had a semi-open central chamber that had probably been meant for recreation and large gatherings, or perhaps even a lecture hall. All the rooms contained very little of value – just old, dusty furniture, torn carpets, faded paintings and filthy rags that might once have been clothes.

The only halfway-interesting thing that they found was a set of five stone busts that depicted four old geezers and a stern-looking granny, probably some important dead people. Oddly enough, the sculptures appeared completely untouched by the passage of time. Fizzy, desperate to appear useful, informed Boxxy that such artistic and/or enchanted antiques might be worth a small fortune to the right collector. The greedy monster immediately stowed them away in its Storage before moving on.

The fourth floor had once been a massive library. While bookshelves still lined the walls, they were entirely empty. Not a single parchment or scrap of paper could be seen, just rows upon rows of empty, dusty shelves. The tower's original residents must have taken all their research materials with them when they had abandoned this place. That, or its current residents had thrown them away.

Ascending higher, they found a number of workrooms, or possibly laboratories. It was honestly difficult to tell. Like the library, the place had been stripped completely bare of anything useful. The only items of note they found were a few dusty tools which the gnome, being a craftsman herself, recognised as those commonly used by Alchemists and Enchanters.

The sixth and final floor of the tower was a large hall connecting three smaller rooms. Each held heavy desks and even more cupboards and bookshelves. They also included an adjacent bedroom, suggesting that the ones who had lived here had been the most important people in the tower. All of the private quarters were, as expected, devoid of anything worth a damn. Even the wall safes, normally hidden by a sliding stone mechanism or painting, had been cracked open and emptied.

In the end, they found no signs of active undead or anything else to indicate the presence of the lich they sought. Boxxy had counted a total of fourteen ash piles throughout the tower, which must have been the remnants of the defeated Necromancer's other minions.

It and Fizzy had spent the better part of two hours rifling through the place with very little to show for it. The sun had set long ago, and the gnome was forced to rely on a makeshift torch for light.

"Uhm, B-B-Boxxy?" she stammered, just as the Mimic was wondering what to do next.

It had to re-form its head before it could answer. The act took almost no time or effort, but doing so every time it needed to talk to the gnome was supremely irritating. It sorely missed the incredibly convenient telepathic link between itself and its familiars. Well, it was technically missing a lot of things, but right now that was the one at the forefront of its mind.

"What?"

And said irritation was quite obvious in the tone of its voice.

"I r-really could use some, um, sl-sleep…"

Her 'owner' only allowed her about five to six hours of sleep per night – considerably less than the full eight she had enjoyed before her life had gone to shit. She had mostly gotten used to this new regime, but today had been especially bad. The long march, the brief but mentally draining encounter with Valeria, and the Blight sapping her strength had made her so exhausted that she felt like she might just keel over. She was also starving and thirsty, but sleep had to come first.

“No,” the Mimic replied bluntly.

“W-why not?”

“You’ll die from Blight.”

Given her current condition, she would succumb to the disease and wither away if she didn’t heal herself every few minutes.

“Uhm, I th-think I can just Consecrate a room and it’ll let me recover…”

“No.”

Fizzy looked desperate, but Boxxy was having none of it. It wasn’t worth the risk. It had put far too much time and effort into training the gnome to simply allow her to die of something as silly as a disease. It would be best to leave this place and resume their search elsewhere.

“But-”

SMACK

A vicious kick to the face sent her flying across the room to crash into a stack of old chairs. Her increased endurance and vitality had made her much sturdier than she had been back when they had first partnered up, so it allowed itself to be a little extra rough when educating her.

“We’re leaving now!”

Fizzy held back the tears in her eyes and gave up on her hopes of getting a good night’s rest. Not only for tonight, but for the rest of her life. That was just how miserable she felt at this point in time.

“Yes, Boxxy! Ri-right away Boxxy!” she said shakily, picking herself up from the ground. She healed herself with a couple of Holy Lights and meekly followed the violent box as it made its way back down the stairs.

Boxxy spotted something amiss just as they entered the empty library on the fourth floor. In a blur of movement, it armed itself with its daggers and a shield, assuming a fighting stance. Without even realising, Fizzy reflexively reached for the heavy wrench on her back.

Putting their guard up had been a wise choice, as a certain someone was waiting for Boxxy and its Paladin in the large chamber. Or rather, *floating,* right in the middle of the room, blocking the staircase leading down to the dorm area on the other side of the library.

“H-How!” Fizzy shrieked. “Didn’t we kill you?”

It was the same undead woman from a few hours ago, along with half a dozen zombified twin-tailed wolves.

“You’ll have to try harder than that if you want to kill a lich!” Valeria sneered.

She pointed directly at the intruders.

“Keep them busy.”

The wolves snarled and lunged forward. Fizzy shook herself out of her stupor and prepared to cast Consecrate, but the lich had no intention of allowing her to finish. She bent forward and threw her arms behind her, letting out an unearthly, piercing howl. The noise was intense – as though a thousand fingernails were scratching a thousand blackboards for a thousand years, all condensed into one singular moment. It shattered Fizzy’s concentration instantly, preventing her from chanting. She fell to the ground, clutching her ears and screaming in agony yet unable to hear the voice pouring out of her own throat.

Boxxy was in worse shape than she was, as it couldn’t even tell up from down, nor right from left. This was because the animate chest did not hear sounds with ears but by picking up vibrations in the air through its magical sonar. The natural ability was part of its biology, allowing it to perceive noises with far greater clarity and precision than people could, especially after acquiring the Perception (PER) Attribute. But the enhanced magical sense was working against it now, amplifying the ghastly screech to levels it hadn’t thought possible.

However, unlike a certain pink-haired gnome that had curled up uselessly on the floor, Boxxy acted to *make* the sound go away. It withstood the sonic onslaught long enough to reacquire the position of the loudmouth in the room, then flung one of its daggers at her. The mithril knife flew true, striking the lich in the chest with enough force to make her lurch backwards and changing the nature of her scream from weaponised sound to a howl of pain.

With the disturbance gone, Boxxy was able to engage the six wolves. It put away its remaining dagger and re-armed itself with a couple of swords, beheading two of the beasts in an instant. They were… much weaker than it had been expecting. Even if they were under the direct influence of a lich and thus far more powerful than their living counterparts, they were still bottom-feeders. Boxxy and Fizzy had fought similar wolves many times before, so the monster expected that they would have no trouble mopping

them up. The most these cursed beasts could do was – just as Valeria had ordered – keep the Mimic busy for a few seconds.

As for the lich, she scowled at the shiny dagger sticking out of her chest, pulled it out and tossed it aside. No blood dripped from the wound, nor clung to the blade. She hadn't expected that the stupid box would be able to not only endure her Sonic Scream but mount a counterattack as well. Otherwise she would have activated her Ethereal Body Skill to avoid the blow completely.

Both of those abilities were leftovers from her days as a banshee, a ghost-type species of monster. It was what Valeria had become following her death and what she had remained until her Rank Up into a lich. The leftover racial Skill from that period allowed her to become intangible, but maintaining that state as a non-ghost rapidly consumed MP. She couldn't use it very often, but it was enough to occasionally get her out of tight spots.

However, that shrieking voice was hardly her only means of attack. She held up a hand, pointing her open palm at the Mimic currently tearing its way through her minions.

"Frostbolt!"

A brilliant white orb shot out from her outstretched hand. It left a glowing trail of blue light as it hissed through the air and hit the Mimic dead-on, splashing over it like a glob of goo.

[Your body has been frozen by magic. HP -351.]

This was different to the Cryomancer magic that Boxxy knew about. Instead of impaling it with enchanted ice, the Spell instead instantly froze a large part of its body. It could feel itself slowing down as the ice sapped its HP while also restricting its movement. It could barely even feel the side where the Spell had struck.

Wondering where its own magical support was, the Mimic briefly turned its attention back to Fizzy, only to realise that she had passed out from the intense sonic assault. She still had a respectable amount of PER but lacked Boxxy's well-developed Mental Fortitude (MNT) and absurdly high Endurance (END). She hadn't been able to withstand the strain of the sonic attack nearly as well as the murderous chest.

A fact that Valeria had also noticed as she moved to aim at the much easier – and arguably more troublesome – target.

“Frostbolt!”

But she failed to hit the gnome, as Boxxy instantly disengaged from the remaining two wolves and leapt into the path of her Spell.

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +160.]

[Your body has been frozen by magic. HP -288.]

As it absorbed the hit, it wrapped a spare tongue around the gnome and chucked it into its Storage. The lich’s eyes widened at the sight of the monster apparently swallowing its companion whole, but she quickly composed herself. She had already seen the Mimic’s Storage Skill in action, so she knew better than to assume that it had literally eaten its one ticket to victory.

And she knew that for a fact, because a monster would only sacrifice itself to protect something if that something was immensely useful. It wasn’t sentimentality or kindness, but cold-blooded pragmatism. Which meant that Boxxy needed the Paladin in order to defeat her. In other words, it had no way of damaging her spectral body on its own. In which case, she was confident that she could easily defeat the simple creature. All she had to do was watch for surprises and manage her MP.

“Frostbolt!”

She was therefore quite glad that she’d practiced using her new Spells. In particular, she was proud of her Frostbolt accuracy. She cackled as the third consecutive hit struck the Mimic. It had tried to dodge the Spell by leaping to the side but the ice encasing its body had rendered it unable to move out of the way in time.

[Your target’s body has been frozen by magic. Target HP -288.]

Once again, the Spell took a hefty chunk out of its HP. The damage, however, was significantly lower than Valeria had expected, thanks largely to the final Skill granted by its Mimic Job.

[Adaptive Defence]

Monsters are notorious for how rapidly they can adapt to their environment, and none exhibit this better than shapeshifters.

Requirements: Level 45 Monster Job, Shapeshift, END 200, INT 100, WIS 100

Type: Passive

Range: Self

[Effects]

Taking elemental damage temporarily increases your damage resistance to that element by 10%.
Increases the elemental resistance granted by this Skill by 3% per Level of this Skill.
The effects of this Skill last for a limited duration equal to 1 second per Level of the Shapeshift Skill.
Can only defend against 1 element at a time.

Unfortunately, Boxxy hadn't gotten as much opportunity to develop the ability as it would have liked, which left the Skill at only Level 2. Still, reducing the power of a spellcaster's attacks by a sixth was certainly nothing to sneeze at. It was a good thing it had decided to hide Fizzy away, or she would have died in two hits, maybe three if she was lucky.

As to why the Mimic had chosen to protect her, it was because the gnome was its best shot at actually killing the lich, just as Valeria had deduced. Although it would appear that such an outcome was rapidly becoming an impossibility, as the best way to fight a Caster was to kill them before they even realised an enemy was aiming for them. Fizzy was unfortunately necessary to ensure the successful completion of its Quest, but there was no telling when she might wake up.

Just then, while Boxxy had its tentacles full blocking the Frostbolts with a bronze-plated shield, it suddenly had an epiphany. All the mass of teeth, violence, and murder needed was some time to think and strategise in order to make use of its idea.

But it couldn't do that in its current situation. It needed to run, but the stairs leading down were all the way on the other side of the decrepit library. Going out that exit would be difficult, but that was by no means the only way out. Having made up its mind, the Mimic leapt backwards and skittered up the steps, past the fifth floor and all the way to the top. It barged into the wide hall connecting the three rooms, only to find Valeria already waiting for it.

"Did you think you could get away?"

Boxxy realised that she must have phased through the floors to block it off. And her final two pets were already clambering up the steps behind it, completing the pincer attack.

"Frostbolt!"

The lich resumed her assault, but Boxxy hopped nimbly to the side, narrowly evading the glowing projectile. Those few seconds it had bought while climbing the stairs had allowed the Mimic to fully recover its HP and regain most of its mobility. It needed to avoid getting frozen again, or it was bound to turn into an ice cube.

"Ice Floes!"

Valeria tried a different Spell, which covered the ground beneath the spider-chest with a thin sheet of ice, clearly intent on forcing the monster to slip. Boxxy, however, had no intention of allowing that and jumped onto the wall before the ice could fully form. It crawled steadily along the vertical surface, dodging the Frostbolts the lich continued to fire at it.

The Mimic circled halfway around the edge of the hall, ducking though one of the side offices to reach the adjacent bedroom's balcony. It sprouted a pair of bat-like wings and leapt into the night, but was unable to properly gain control of its fall. It slammed into the ground. Hard.

[You have suffered blunt force trauma. HP -311.]

[Your flesh has been mended. HP +160.]

The Mimic took a moment to dig its rectangular body out of the dirt and began circling the tower, searching for something.

The nature of its earlier revelation was simple. The floating woman was indeed the lich it was looking for – or so she claimed. Which meant that she was the target of its Quest after all, but the task in question said only that it had to *defeat* her, not *kill* her. The Mimic had assumed that those two things were synonymous, but that clearly wasn't the case. If anything, killing her had only made things worse.

In the few moments it had to think, it realised another thing. The way that she had come back to 'life' in perfect condition, with memory and Skills completely intact, was eerily familiar. Not to mention that that body of hers made no sense on the inside. It was highly likely that she was a being somewhat similar to a demon – something with a conjured physical form and an immortal soul. Even if it were to kill her again, there was a good chance she'd only come back.

That was okay though, because it just had to *defeat* her.

Circling the tower's base, it finally spotted what it was looking for – the set of heavy steel doors that led into the basement. Boxxy should have realised it earlier, but the tower's layout was identical to the building where

it had had its Jobs taken from it. Which meant that it *also* had a basement filled with various magical reagents and ritual markings. If the source of that lich's rebirth was anywhere, that would surely be the place.

"Frostbolt!"

Boxxy hopped back from the doors the instant it heard the chant. Valeria was directly overhead and floating gently downwards as she prepared yet another Spell. She had found the Mimic quickly. *Too* quickly. Boxxy had broken from her line of sight, but she'd already managed to find the shapeshifter. Regardless of how she had done so, she was obviously quite intent on keeping it out of the basement.

This only served to reinforce the creature's ad hoc theory, but the Mimic still needed to distract her long enough to get through the door. Once more, it reached into its Storage and flung something directly at her. Valeria only caught a glimpse of the object, which looked to be a metal cylinder about the size of a sword's handle. She had no idea what it was, but immediately turned incorporeal anyway, wary of being damaged by whatever the thing was.

Unfortunately for her, it wasn't designed to inflict damage. It was a flashbang, a leftover from Boxxy's Artificer days.

PANNNN

It did exactly as its name suggested as it flashed and banged right in the lich's face, bathing the area around the tower in brilliant white light. Valeria screamed and covered her eyes, but it was already too late. Boxxy had noticed that, even when she was incorporeal, she still relied heavily on her sight. And as it had just learned first-hand, where there existed a sense, there was also a way to confuse it.

It took the lich several seconds to regain the use of her eyes, but her vision was still clouded by colourful blotches. By the time she had recovered enough to see properly, the Mimic had already picked the lock and was nowhere to be seen. Using her Detect Life Skill allowed her to track the monster's life force through the walls and confirm that it had already gone inside and was currently scampering around the interior.

"No…" she muttered. "Noooooo!"

She sailed forward, desperate to intercept the hateful creature. But even at maximum speed, she wasn't nearly fast enough. While she could float through solid objects, she could only move at a rate comparable to a low-

Levelled human's running pace, which was much, much too slow when compared with the eight-legged freak-box. She could feel the hastily-raised minions she'd left in the basement as a last line of defence being taken out one after the other. If she'd still had control over the five Death Knights down there, they could have easily stopped the stupid box, maybe even killed it.

But that was merely a what-if. Her rash, vengeful actions had weakened her preparations. She had also underestimated her opponent. Not its combat strength – she was still confident that she could beat it when it came to a direct fight. However, the simple-looking monster had turned out to be a lot more resourceful than she'd thought, especially when it came to giving her the run-around.

Still, she couldn't give up. She rushed through the basement and headed for the far corner of the large chamber. She arrived just in time to watch in horror as the Mimic coiled its tongue around the shiniest item in the decrepit room.

The thing that had caught its attention was an egg-shaped object about ten centimetres wide and fifteen tall. Its smooth, glassy surface was a rich blue colour that would put even the brightest sapphire to shame. An intricate golden pattern of thorns, crows, skeletons, grasping hands and other grim imagery danced across it, covering roughly half of its brilliant surface. But the highlight of its design was the golden skull depicted on one side, a duo of shining, blood-red gems faceted inside its eye sockets.

The expensive-looking item had been held on a custom-designed silver tripod, which had been placed on a waist-high stone pedestal. Its extravagance and pride of place clearly marked it as an object of some importance. It was also the only thing in the entire tower that seemed to be worth more than a few coins, so it stood to reason that it belonged to the lich.

And it was indeed both hers and important, for the thing was her phylactery – the vessel that held her undying soul. It was through this object that she was able to regenerate her physical body as many times as she wanted. However, it was also her weakness. Not only would her power weaken if she were to stray too far from it, but breaking it was the only way to truly destroy her. Losing the linchpin binding her to this mortal coil would be nothing short of checkmate.

Time seemed to slow as she tried desperately to stop the Mimic, but it was clear she wouldn't make it in time. Just how in the world had the moronic box figured out her weakness right in the middle of the fight? It certainly hadn't known before, so why had it suddenly made a beeline for the phylactery? And for that matter, how had it managed to unlock the damned door so quickly?

The questions rushed through her thrice-rotten head during the split second it took for Boxxy to toss the shiny thing into its open maw – all of which could be answered with a single word:

Experience.

The lingering knowledge of demons. The trauma of having its Jobs and Skills severed from it. The insight granted by the Lockpick Skill. The time it had spent as an Artificer. Its aptitude for confusing and befuddling its opponents. And last but not least, the instinctive need to covet and collect all things shiny. All of these factors had conspired together to make what happened next, in this singular point in time, a reality.

The Storage portal inside Boxxy's maw snapped shut, stowing away its prize. With the link between her soul and body severed, Valeria's physical form fell limply to the ground. It then started crumbling, returning to the dust whence it came.

The Mimic, understandably, had no idea exactly why that had happened, as it had in no way deduced the phylactery's purpose. It had come here looking for some sort of ritual circle or glowing sigil, similar to the ones it had used during demonic rituals. When it had failed to find anything like that in the mostly empty basement, it had decided to pocket the shiny thing while it had the chance, then run away with all due haste.

Thus, seeing the lich instantly collapse and disappear caught it more than a little off-guard. Although certainly not unwelcome, this sudden development was completely outside the Mimic's scope of understanding. It just seemed like a massive coincidence, which hinted that this outcome was the very thing Christie had had in mind when she had sent Boxxy on its errand. But the Mimic didn't have to wait to learn if there was any merit to its assumption.

Because not only was the 'Defeat the lich' Quest now marked as complete, but Boxxy once again found itself sitting at a table in an endlessly white room.

Clap

Clap

Clap

With Jill, the applauding Goddess of Uncertainty, for company.

Part Five

"So," said Paul, "I suppose congratulations are in order."

The Mimic, who had once again been forced into the shape of a young child, just smiled dumbly in response.

"What just happened?"

"You defeated the lich."

"How?"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out shortly."

The three-tailed iguana snapped its windows as per usual, enveloping Boxxy in a bright light and flooding its consciousness with a series of messages.

[Level up!]
[Level up!]
[Level up!]
…
…
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 25 Warlock! INT +50. MNT +50. END +50.]
[Proficiency level increased. Summon Familiar is now Level 7. INT +14. WIS +7. MNT +7.]
[Proficiency level increased. Power Overwhelming is now Level 6. INT +24.]
[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 6. WIS +2. MNT +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Crystallise Magic is now Level 5. INT +10. WIS +10.]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 12 Artificer. DEX +24. WIS +24. PER +24.]
[Proficiency level increased. Clockwork Expertise is now Level 3. DEX +6. PER +6.]

[Proficiency level increased. Explosives Handling is now Level 2. DEX +4. WIS +4.]

[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Hero of Chaos.]

[Proficiency level increased. Chaotic Disposition is now Level 1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Agent of Chaos is now Level 1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Essence Concealment is now Level 1.]

The Mimic stood with its mouth agape for a good minute while its mind underwent what could only be described as a reboot. Its newly-restored mental capacity allowed it to look at the past three weeks of its life with a fresh set of eyes. The escape from its flying cage, Fizzy's training, their journey through the woods and subsequent trek through the Blight, everything up to the confrontation with the lich.

"All better?" LaQuisha asked, seeing the thoroughly enlightened look in its red eyes.

"Yeah… I think I understand now."

Granted, it still didn't know what a 'phylactery' was and merely thought of the shiny egg as the lich's real body, but it was a close enough guess. It had also deduced that there was a good chance that she might reappear the instant it removed the gilded egg thing from its Storage. For all it knew, she even had the power to materialise inside its pocket dimension, so it would need to be extra careful when accessing that particular space.

"Good, then I can skip having to explain things. The undead are so predictable that the topic bores me to tears."

"… Zaffron?"

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Theodore said with a wave of his liver. "It all happened as expected in the end."

This was only the second time that Boxxy had expressed genuine gratitude towards another being, but the recipient didn't exactly seem thrilled about it. In fact, the Mimic couldn't help but notice that the bizarre entity's attitude had thus far been much less enthusiastic than their first meeting. Shouldn't Malfagar be happier, considering that his divine will had been carried out?

"Are you disappointed that I won?"

“A little, yes, but it’s nothing personal. You fought, struggled, and survived, just as I predicted you would. The odds were very much in your favour even without the gnome, but her presence made this outcome the overwhelmingly likely one. I was merely hoping to see something unexpected, but I suppose you can’t surprise me all the time.”

Boxxy had to admit, the god had a point. The Mimic was tricky, resilient, and possessed a good set of instincts, so it would have figured out the lich’s weakness eventually. It could have found her much sooner too, if Fizzy hadn’t slowed it down. Though she had helped to make the first bout something of an easy win, in the end the tiny Paladin’s presence had been little more than a convenience at best, or a distraction at worst.

“If you knew I would succeed, then why send me at all?”

“Because, my newly-chosen Hero, a prediction is different to a prophecy. Even if the chance of failure is slim, it is nonetheless there. You would do well to remember that. No matter how good I am at reading between the lines, that little thing called free will remains an enigma wrapped in a mystery, shrouded by unknowable variables. Even to someone like me.”

“What’s an enigma? Is it tasty?”

“Hah! Hahahaha!”

The God of Chance let out a hearty laugh that seemed to cheer him up a bit.

“Sorry about that,” he said with a mosquito on his rainbow. “I almost forgot who I was talking to. You probably don’t care about the infinite realms of probability, do you?”

“No, not really.”

Boxxy was only curious as to why Kole was disappointed that it had survived. Even if its mental faculties had been restored to what they had been prior to its capture, it was still a colossal simpleton. A simple ‘because it was boring’ would have sufficed as an answer to its query.

“That’s fine, I just have a habit of rambling on sometimes. Ignoring me is really for the best.”

“Okay. But can I try casting a Spell? I wanna see if it still works right.”

“Sure, go right ahead.”

The child-shaped monster held out its hand and chanted its most basic Spell.

“Shadowbolt!”

A mass of hissing darkness appeared, flying into the distance before fizzling out of existence, just as it should have. Boxxy’s face lit up with a bright, slack-jawed smile sweet enough to give someone cavities. It giggled and hopped in its seat, clearly excited.

“Say, Boxxy,” Tim interrupted its little celebration, “could you cast that again?”

The request was a little odd, but it was no big deal, so the Mimic gladly complied, firing another Shadowbolt into the infinite white void. But rather than flying off into the distance, it swerved around as though it were a living thing and flew straight at Jack. It froze in the air directly in front of him, as if time had stopped for the volatile lump of eldritch energy. It was a strange thing for Boxxy to see, but it served to remind the animate chest that Randy was indeed a god, and as such had powers that mere mortals could not fathom. Though that did not exactly explain *why* the deity was so interested in the frozen projectile.

“Huh. Well, what do you know, it really is like that after all,” he muttered.

“What is?” Boxxy asked.

“I always thought your Shadowbolts were a bit weird, but I wasn’t sure why until just now.”

“Weird how?”

“I mean, look at it!” Dana waved her guitar legs excitedly. “I wasn’t able to tell just from the remote viewing since it spins around so fast as it flies, but the Spell’s payload is shaped like a cube! A cube!”

“So?” asked the Mimic, unable to grasp the significance.

“*So?* So why is it in that shape specifically? Shouldn’t it be a sphere?”

“Dunno,” Boxxy shrugged. “I just casted it like normal.”

“Wait, don’t tell me – when you imagine gathering a mass of shadow and throwing it at people, what sort of mental image do you use?”

“A chest.”

“… A chest? Why a chest?”

“Because it needs to be a perfectly balanced shape. And square chests are perfect.”

Brandon had realised almost immediately how idiotic the question was, considering who he was asking, but Boxxy’s answer wasn’t quite what he’d

expected.

"Hah. A chest. Hahaha! I see, I see – so it was *that* after all!"

Once again – much like the time it had sacrificed a succubus as a 'pure maiden' – the Mimic's unorthodox perceptions and preconceptions had slightly bent this world's rules.

"Is the shape bad?" it asked, concerned.

"No, not bad. It doesn't actually have any negative impact on the Spell, so you don't need to worry about it."

"Oh. But it's still strange?"

"Quite so. You sometimes see magic users that can twist the shape of their magic like this, but they usually need to have a firm and intimate understanding of what magic is and how to use it. This is the first time I've seen someone so… *inexperienced* alter a basic Spell like that, so it caught me off guard. Hah! Do I know how to pick a Hero or what!"

"If you say so," Boxxy shrugged again.

"Anyway, I should probably send you back now."

"… What should I do from now on?"

"Hm?" Ted raised a shoe. "Why are you asking me?"

"Aren't you my boss now?"

"Why would I be?"

"That's how this thing works, right? The Hero serves the god?"

"Generally speaking yes, but I'm not like that. If I tell you to go and do something, then I know where you're going, what you'll be doing, and worst of all – how it will end. That takes almost all of the fun out of this thing. All I expect from you is that you be yourself and do what you please."

Ironically enough, the God of Chaos's personal interference in a matter took notions like chance, luck, and coincidence completely off the table, or at the very least stacked the odds overwhelmingly towards a specific outcome. It was like knowing the ending of a book after opening the first page. Anyone would have been bored with that sort of setup, but especially in Charlie's case.

"Then what about the lich?" Boxxy asked.

"What about her?"

"Didn't you have any intention for her?"

“Nothing in particular. The whole reason I brought you two back together was because I was curious to see how you would handle her, and that hasn’t changed. So by all means, do with her as you please. The same goes for that little Champion of mine, by the way.”

“What? You won’t mind if I kill your servant?”

“Not at all. I don’t particularly care if she survives since both her life and death are bound to be entertaining in their own ways. That said, however, you may want to let her out of that pocket dimension of yours before she suffocates.”

“Oh, right. Okay.”

“Alright then, I’ll be sending you back now. I am eager to see what exciting things will come from that free will of yours!”

Snap

The monster disappeared from the white room, back to the physical realm.

Now that there was no one around to perceive him, the God of Chaos was finally able to stabilize his form. He stood at the fake table for a while longer, quietly staring at the cubic Shadowbolt.

“A chest, huh?” he mumbled to himself. “Shadowbolt.”

His own projectile of solid darkness materialised above him, hanging frozen in time just like the Mimic’s. It was huge – gigantic, even. So big it must have been over forty metres wide. And, oddly enough, it had assumed the same six-sided shape as Boxxy’s.

“… Really can’t tell if it’s a die or not without the markings, huh?”

Mumbling to nobody in particular, he dispersed the magic around him with a small smile. Coincidences like that were always enjoyable, no matter how small. Sighing happily, he turned his divine attention back to the brewing war. His taking a personal interest was only a matter of course considering its trigger had been a byproduct of his and his new Hero’s actions. Consequently, he was very eager to see the results of that particular chain of events.

A number of graphs, charts, and maps, all forged from solid green light, appeared around him as he resumed his work. Millions upon millions of variables flickered, waxed, and waned as he analysed all the factors involved in the upcoming conflict. He would use this incredibly complex model, one that nobody but himself could comprehend, to determine the

most and least likely outcomes. And then, once he was finished, he would root for the underdogs no matter who they were, just as he'd always done.

However, that wasn't why he had brought the thing from his memory. It was because he had wanted to introduce a new factor into his simulation model, a rogue variable by the name of Boxxy T. Morningwood. He created a tiny illusory replica of the monster, containing all the data that he had on it – from its Status and physical capabilities to its highly erratic thought processes and behavioural patterns.

He 'placed' it on the map of the continent, watching with a wide grin as all his hard work and calculations proved to have been for naught.

Part Six

Boxxy returned safe and sound to its body, still in the tower's basement. It quickly opened its Storage and spat Fizzy out. The gnome was alive, but she hadn't regained consciousness just yet.

Simply leaving her like this was dangerous, however, as she could die from the Blight, so the Mimic also took out a healing potion and fed it to her. Her green eyes shot open as she gasped for air in the next instant.

"Wha–? Who?!"

She looked around in a panic but calmed after realising that the Mimic must have beaten the lich. Either that or it had run away, but at least it seemed that neither of them was in any immediate danger.

"D-did you win?"

"Yes."

Of course you did, she thought. *As if some whorish corpse would be able to stop **that** thing.*

"S-So the Quest is done?"

"Yes."

"Then, wh-what happens now?"

"I have to call Carl."

Fizzy had no idea who Carl was, but she had something far more important to worry about: her personal safety. A goal that required she serve this monster to the fullest of her abilities, lest it finally judge her too bothersome to keep alive.

"Oh, okay. Then what do I n-n-n-need to do?"

"You just sit there and be quiet."

"Yes, Boxxy! Whatever you say, Boxxy!"

1-800-7355-9687-7685

The Mimic mind-dialled Demons 'R' Us. It had tried to do so several times over the past few weeks, but to no avail. That particular ability was something that it had gained as a side effect of Summon Familiar, so it naturally had lost it along with the Skill. And now that it had access to it once more, its attempt to mentally contact an extra-dimensional being was finally successful.

Click

“We’re sorry, the number you are trying to reach is currently busy. Please try again later.”

Boop-boop-boop-boop-boop

Unfortunately, the response was not quite what it had been expecting. Rather than Carl’s raspy voice, what greeted it had been a strangely monotonous female-sounding one, followed by an unfamiliar beeping tone. That was *odd,* to say the least. Boxxy reattempted the connection ‘later’ – which it took to understand as ‘immediately afterwards’ – but someone else had beaten it to the punch.

Ring-ring

Click

“Hello?”

“Boxxyyyyy!” Carl sounded excited.

Apparently, the line had been busy because the devil and the Mimic had been trying to contact each other at the exact same time.

“That was one *crazy* battle just now! The look on that girl’s face when you swallowed her phylactery was fucking priceless!”

“… You saw that?”

“Well yeah, how could I not?”

“How, though?”

The Mimic had been under the impression that demons were unable to peer into the physical realm from the Beyond. So how had Carl supposedly ‘seen’ it fight the lich?

“… You mean you didn’t know? About the broadcasts, I mean?”

“Are broadcasts tasty?”

“Okay, guess you didn’t. Uhm, wow, okay. How should I– Hey, watch it, chucklefuck!” Carl yelled suddenly. “I don’t care, that’s hardly a reason to mess up my office! Now shut up and let me finish! … Or else I’m gonna blacklist your sorry ass so hard you won’t get a gig in the next five hundred years! … Yeah, that’s what I thought. Damn mutt.”

“Carl? Is something going on over there?”

“No, no, nothing at all. Just had an uppity cerberus to deal with. Anywho, I’m calling about your contracts. I was told they were cancelled against your will, due to a forced Job Removal. Is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Then do you wish to restore the previously voided contracts?”

"… I have a choice?"

"Well, yeah. Your familiars were unbound against your will, but that doesn't mean you can't hire new ones if you want."

This was a possibility Boxxy hadn't considered, but it certainly sounded tempting. Between its first-hand experience working with Snack and Arms and its mid-Level Demonology Skill, it now had a much deeper understanding of what the various demons were capable of. Maybe, the Mimic figured, it ought to 'hire' better familiars?

"I'll just take Snack and Arms back."

In the end, however, it chose to stick with what it knew over taking a risk with unknown elements. Despite their flaws, the succubus/fiend pair were quite excellent at what they did.

"Super – just needed the confirmation. Gimme a second here."

Tak tak takatakatakatak tak tak

"There, done. Your familiars are all set up and ready for you. Feel free to summon them at any time."

"That was fast."

"Well, I sorta got everything ready in advance. No reason to keep the big boss's Hero waiting, you know?"

"I see. Thanks, Carl."

Boxxy had almost forgotten how nice it felt to work with an actual professional, as opposed to a certain pink-haired gnome who still required basic survival lessons.

"Hey, no problem buddy. Is there anything else you need?"

"No."

"Understood. I'll be here if you need me. Goodbye."

"Bye."

Click

Boxxy promptly activated the Summon Familiar Skill, startling Fizzy. From her perspective, she'd just seen a wooden treasure chest sit perfectly still for a minute or two before concentric circles of ever-shifting demonic runes suddenly appeared around it. As this was her first time witnessing a summoning, she had very little idea what was going on. Nevertheless, she knew better than to interrupt the Mimic for no good reason. Another bad habit that had been systematically beaten out of her.

The sudden light show dispersed after ten seconds, leaving behind a woman wearing a skimpy red leather outfit. She was clearly no human or elf given her enormous breasts, blue skin and hair, golden curved horns, huge bat-like wings and the spaded tail sprouting from just above her plush backside.

Xera's glowing red eyes stared disdainfully at the gnome as though she were looking at a piece of horse dung on the side of the road.

"Inferior creature," she hissed. "How dare you hog my beloved master's affections all this time?"

"I, uh, you what? Master? Affections? Beloved? WHAT!"

"Ah, I said it out loud…" the succubus put a hand to her cheek.

The demoness had been doing a lot of soul-searching these past few weeks, mostly because there wasn't much else to do in the Beyond. And, much to her surprise, she'd found that she *missed* being by her master's side. The Mimic was a violent, abusive, selfish prick that unapologetically viewed her as a thing rather than a person, and consequently she had grown immensely fond of it.

She had at first hesitated to call the strange sensation something silly like 'love.' After all, a succubus in love? What sort of absurd fairy tale was that? However, between the crushing loneliness she had felt after having her contract forcefully terminated and the unmistakable jealousy now welling up in her breast, there was very little doubt in her mind.

Xera turned her attention away from the tiny harlot and towards the object of her twisted affections. The harsh look on her face vanished instantly, replaced by a soft, almost demure expression. Her eyes lit up and her lips quivered a bit as she smiled.

"M-Master?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Yes?" Boxxy answered through its restored telepathic link.

"Masteeeeeer!"

She nearly wept with joy as she leapt headfirst at the Mimic, arms wide open as if to hug the wooden chest. Overcome with a fuzzy, nostalgic feeling, Boxxy also moved to accept her embrace.

Which meant that it opened its massive maw and closed it around her upper body, its sharp teeth sinking into her soft flesh as it gnawed on her mercilessly. The succubus shuddered at the long-awaited stimulation, pain turning to pleasure as she revelled in the intense sensations only Boxxy T.

Morningwood could give her. The hardcore masochist had yearned for this so much that she set a personal record of four climaxes before her corporeal form gave out and her soul was sent back to the Beyond, moaning all the while.

Boxxy was left quite satisfied as well. It had sorely missed Snack's comforting flavour, though it couldn't help but feel a tiny bit annoyed when her succulent demon-flesh disappeared from its mouth.

"Uhm, B-Boxxy?" Fizzy spoke up. "Wh-who was that?"

"That was Snack."

"Ah… I see…"

The gnome's eyes lost focus as realisation struck. She'd only asked because she had recognised the succubus's face. After all, it was the exact same face Boxxy made whenever it spoke to her. She was obviously one of the summoned familiars Fizzy had heard of, probably the same one that had tampered with her memory. And with a nickname like Snack, it was painfully obvious what her function was. For the briefest moment, the gnome found herself sympathising with the demoness, despite the hostility she'd shown her.

However, when Xera was re-summoned a minute later, she did not look apprehensive, fearful, or even angry. She hummed lightly to herself, a thoroughly content smile on her face. Her mood and disposition had improved so much, in fact, that it looked like getting eaten was exactly what she'd wanted. Come to think of it, hadn't her wails and moans sounded more… *erotic* than anything else? The gnome had averted her gaze from the violence, but the noises had been impossible to ignore.

Having deduced the nature of Xera's 'eccentricities,' the perceptive Paladin felt incredibly silly for feeling even a tiny shred of sympathy for the pervert.

The box, the succubus and the gnome sat in near-total silence while they waited for Boxxy's MP to recover. The Blight still had ahold of Fizzy, so she had to heal herself every few minutes, though Xera's demonic constitution was able to repel the magical disease and fight off any negative side effects. Which was a good thing, seeing as her vitality was much weaker than Fizzy's.

After about ten minutes of sitting around, Boxxy was able to repeat the summoning to drag Kora into the mortal realm. The muscular, red-skinned

fiend appeared, sporting a gigantic, toothy grin. She disregarded the tiny Paladin entirely, raising both her right palms in the air as a greeting.

"Yo, boss! Nice to see you're alive and kicking!"

"Me too," the Mimic replied in good humour.

"Man, am I ever glad to be back here. I was *seriously* dreading losing you as a master, you know!"

It was the truth. Much like Xera, Kora had also grown attached to Boxxy. Unlike the succubus, however, her feelings were purely platonic. She just found it both amusing and exciting to be around this thing. Sure, there were some rough spots, like the boring-ass guard duty, dragging the heavy-ass cart, and the Mimic's violent-ass experiments, but that was overshadowed by the fun she had in the interim. The sheer number of things she got to smash on a daily basis had made her the envy of all her peers, especially when one of those things was the tight butthole of a succubus practically begging to be dicked to literal death.

Speaking of which…

"Boss, requesting permission to fuck the succubus in the ass!"

Xera's already smiling face brightened even more at Kora's enthusiastic words. Just because she'd admitted to having feelings for her master didn't mean that she no longer enjoyed a good pounding. Fizzy's eyes, on the other hand, widened in surprise. She wasn't quite sure how that would work between two clearly female demons, and she found herself morbidly curious. Of course, said curiosity would inevitably dissipate when she found out about Kora's third leg.

"Denied."

However, it seemed that that particular revelation would have to wait.

"First we find a place with tastier air."

Just because the Mimic was able to fight off the degenerative effects of the Blight didn't mean that it couldn't feel them. Even if they only amounted to a vague sensation of lethargy and exhaustion, unpleasant things were still unpleasant, and thus it swiftly mobilised its demons and Paladin and set out into the night.

Boxxy once again found itself beset by hundreds of wild undead as it made its way through the barren, dying land. This time, however, it had Kora and Xera to do all the work. The succubus's magical flame incinerated

nearly everything in their path while the fiend stomped the rest into bloody paste.

Fizzy was just thankful that her role had been reduced to merely the healer who followed behind, providing support when necessary. It was a far less taxing job than what she had gone through that afternoon. She barely had to do anything, other than carry a torch and occasionally heal herself.

She didn't let herself calm down too much, though. The unsettling glances she was getting from the two demons sent chills down her spine. One of them looked at her like she was a piece of trash, while the other seemed to be sizing her up as though she were planning to devour her. The poor gnome wasn't quite sure which she should be more worried about.

As for Boxxy, it simply followed the trail of destruction left by its newly reinstated familiars, taking the opportunity to review its Status. Both the Warlock and Artificer Jobs appeared to be back to where they had been prior to its capture. It felt as though it had perhaps lost a bit of progress, but the all-important Jobs and Skills were there at the appropriate Levels, so it really couldn't complain. After confirming for the umpteenth time that everything seemed to be in order, it finally turned its attention to the new things that it had acquired.

[Hero of Chaos]

The harbinger of chaos and confusion.

Requirements: Officially recognised by the Goddess of Coincidence

[Effects]

Grants the Chaotic Disposition, Agent of Chaos and Essence Concealment Skills.

The Perk itself appeared to be little more than a fancy title granting a bunch of Skills, but all of them were a bit… odd. For starters, they didn't seem to confer any sort of Attribute bonus, plus their maximum Level appeared to be only 1. Still, the god called Willy had said that there was a good chance that Boxxy would find them tasty, so it inspected them with no small amount of anticipation.

Chaotic Disposition

Under the divine protection of the God of Probability.

Requirements: Hero of Chaos

Type: Passive

Range: Self

[Effects]
Has a chance to produce a random magical effect each time MP is spent.
This Skill may not be triggered more than once every 60 seconds.

The first one was… vague, to say the least. Still, Boxxy was eager to see how it worked, so it started firing Shadowbolts into the night sky, one after the other. This naturally drew the attention of the three women with whom it was travelling. They watched curiously until, on the sixth Shadowbolt, something finally happened.

[Chaotic energies swirl around you. Your body has turned pink for 1 minute.]

And indeed, the Mimic's predominantly wood-brown shell turned a bright, eye-catching pink that put the gnome's pigtails to shame.

"Pfffthahaha! What the fuuuck?! Aaah hahahahaha!"

Kora roared with laughter. There was never a dull moment as long as Boxxy was around. Xera and Fizzy, on the other hand, tried their hardest not to follow her example. The former did so out of respect, the latter, fear.

Boxxy was more than a little disturbed at this development. It wasn't a fan of pink. That was the most un-stealthy colour imaginable, after all. It attempted to forcibly change its pigmentation, but the effect of the Chaotic Disposition Skill proved much stronger than Shapeshift. Granted, changing its colouration was something it already struggled with, but this was unlike anything it had experienced before. What was the purpose of this pointlessly powerful effect?! Then again, it was only temporary, so the Mimic gave up trying to fix it and moved on to its next god-given Skill.

[Agent of Chaos]
Complex machinations converge to a single act of power.
Requirements: Hero of Chaos
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Your actions will have more profound consequences.
Increases the effectiveness of the LCK Attribute by 10%.

This one was even less clear on what its function was. Sure, it boosted the effects of the LCK Attribute, but Boxxy still had very little idea of what that Attribute actually did in the first place. That aside, the more the Mimic pondered the obtuse ability, the more ominous it seemed. The always-bored

God of Rounding Errors had probably forced the bizarre Skill on it so that things would get more interesting. And ‘more interesting’ didn’t necessarily mean good things for the one saddled with the ability.

The same could be said for the first Skill. If the effect truly *was* random, then it wasn’t a stretch to assume that it could cause something bad to happen. Or it might be unexpectedly beneficial. In the end, only time would tell if these Skills were tasty or not. That said, Boxxy’s scepticism only increased when it remembered that William had said that there was an eighty-something-percent chance of the Mimic finding the Hero thing to its liking. Good odds, but not nearly good enough, considering their source.

Then again, after seeing the last Skill on the list, Boxxy had to concede that Gigaclash may have had a point.

[Essence Concealment]

Being a Hero sometimes requires a certain degree of subtlety.
Requirements: Hero (Any)
Type: Toggled (OFF)
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: None
Range: Self

[Effects]

Allows the configuration of a Mask Status every time this Skill is toggled on.
Substitutes the user’s true Status with a Mask Status when targeted by Appraisal-type effects.
This Skill does not affect minds touched by divinity.

With this at its disposal, Boxxy would finally be able to overcome one of the major hurdles it faced when attempting to blend in civilised society – mandatory Appraisal checks. Oddly enough, this appeared to be a Skill that all Heroes had access to, not just Morgan’s. It briefly wondered if it might have gotten a better deal from one of the other members of Terrania’s pantheon, but it gave up on that thought. From what little it knew of those other deities, it had been able to determine that they all favoured one enlightened race or another. The Goddess of Happenstance was probably the only one willing to give the villainous box the time of day.

Boxxy therefore decided to be happy with what it had gotten and immediately activated the Skill to see what its options were. It spent the

better part of an hour fiddling with the divine gift like some sort of toy while absentmindedly following the others.

[You are no longer afflicted with Blight. Automatic HP recovery has returned to normal.]

The sudden notification made Boxxy tear its attention away from the multitude of menus floating around in its mind to take in its surroundings. This left its current fake Status proclaiming it to be Enrico Rodriguez de la Butts, a dwarf woman with an apparent age of nine hundred and fifty fish. It would get back to that eventually, but right now it needed to get its bearings.

The diseased wasteland had given way to the same untamed terrain the Mimic had been traversing the past few weeks. The return trip had taken significantly less time than reaching the tower, which was unsurprising considering the short work Snack and Arms had made of the mindless undead. Not to mention that it didn't have to stop and wait for Fizzy to catch her breath after every battle.

Once the group had put some more distance between themselves and the Blight-infested landscape, the Mimic found a shallow cave in the side of a random cliff and called for a rest until dawn.

Having finally gotten permission to take a break, the gnome collapsed on the spot and fell asleep instantly. She slept like the rock she lay face down on, not even registering the sounds of two pairs of demonic thighs slapping against each other just outside the cave. Her body had learned the hard way that prolonged exposure to Blight was an immensely draining experience. The fact that she had been able to push herself to this extent without passing out sooner was nothing short of a miracle.

Boxxy too found itself unreasonably drained by the Blight. Not as badly as the gnome, but it was still tired enough to need a good night's sleep. It sat next to the tiny Paladin, its mind busy with thoughts of the future as it waited for sleep to claim it.

It considered that the man called Edward didn't seem to be the kind of human who would leave a job unfinished and thus would no doubt chase after the escaped prisoners. Boxxy naturally wanted to avoid that, so it sought to put as much distance between the two of them as mimically possible. Once it had hidden itself away, it could continue to grow in strength and experience before finally taking its revenge. It would murder

the ever-living crap out of the Spymaster, feast on his flesh, vomit him up, then eat him again.

That was a story for later, though. Right now, the shapeshifter concerned itself with recuperating from the Blight and taking a restful nap.

And then it would see if that lich could perhaps be… persuaded… to do its bidding.

Interlude
The Shadow of Death

[You died.]

The rather ominous notification was the last thing Valeria Vortena saw before her body gave out. Her spirit rose from her remains and looked on in mute horror as her killer – one of the very mimics she had described as harmless sacks of XP just minutes before – devoured her body in just a few bites. After which it proceeded to slam itself against the wall for seemingly no reason, and then, once it was done, licked up any evidence of Valeria's fate and sat back down as if nothing had happened.

***This** is what killed me?!*

Finding out that she had been murdered by such a moron somehow made the situation even worse. Her spirit lingered in the room, cursing the animate chest for a good three hours as she unleashed a lifetime's worth of resentment. Her efforts were for naught, however, as the yet-unnamed mimic could not converse with disembodied spirits. Or even sense them, for that matter. It simply stood in a single spot, chesting as always while blissfully ignorant of the malicious spectre floating above it. As to why Valeria's spirit continued to linger, it was simple:

Those who ventured into Taboo were not granted easy deaths.

Like every other Necromancer in existence, the young woman had violated the Taboo of Mortimer, the God of Death and Commerce. Plus, her rather unsavoury hobby of having questionable relations with monsters had broken the holy law of Nyrie, the patron Goddess of Nature and Fertility.

Though it wasn't as though either of them had personally witnessed Valeria's transgressions. Even if they were gods, they were neither omniscient nor omnipotent, which was why the gods of Terrania had used their considerable power to automate certain divine mechanisms within the world. One of which was the Taboo, used to punish mortals for knowingly and willingly breaking the laws set in place by the gods. There were nine of these holy decrees – one for each member of the pantheon – and they each forbade that which the divines saw as the antithesis of their respective existences.

Should a mortal commit one of these grave sins, they would immediately lose an amount of Faith (FTH) directly proportional to the

severity of their crime. Once this Attribute dipped into the negative, which happened instantly to those without it on their Status, they would be marked with the stigma of the Taboo Skill. The deeper they sunk into depravity, the higher the Taboo would grow in Level. Conversely, if the sinner wholeheartedly repented and sought redemption, it was possible to have their crimes forgiven and the Taboo lifted.

However, that was not an option for some. There were those that had fallen so far that no number of offerings, prayers or pilgrimages could ever absolve them. Only death had the power to free those wayward souls from the weight of their transgressions. Literally, as Mortimer would see to it that their souls were cleansed of taint so that they could be reincarnated without their past lives influencing future ones.

Not *personally*, of course. Even the God of Death couldn't attend to every single dead soul on Terrania by himself. He had a system in place, something the scriptures called the Well of Souls, which was responsible for processing the vast majority of the world's dead.

Unfortunately, it wasn't foolproof. Certain individuals… fell through the cracks, as it were. When that happened, it usually led to the creation of a cursed undead being that would be unable to move on unless its body was utterly destroyed. Taboo holders especially were likely to go down that path if the Well of Souls wasn't able to claim them fast enough, which was what had happened to Valeria. Except that she couldn't return to her own body, as it had been in the process of being digested.

As a result, the dungeon she had died in had claimed her spiteful soul. The dungeon core, which was simply fulfilling its function of populating the sprawling cave system with monsters, bound the woman to its service as a Level 13 Banshee. It suppressed her ego and enslaved her, forcing her to act as just another of the faceless undead within the Litigar Dungeon Complex's Red Zone.

And she performed her function, quite admirably at that. Her brief life as an adventurer and a Necromancer had given her just the edge she'd needed. Even if she'd been robbed of her free will, certain practical skills and habits that had been drilled into her by her guild still remained. Her mindless, barely conscious self was able to use them to great effect as she helped her undead brethren prey upon targets of opportunity.

However, she occasionally found herself drifting from the Red Zone into the Yellow or Green. The grudge she held against the stupid, murdering

box remained, along with her knowledge and training, and was powerful enough to cause her to drift away from her assigned area. These little jaunts didn't last long before the dungeon's leash pulled her back, but they were not entirely for naught. She did manage to cause the death of anyone unfortunate enough to cross her path, since those unprepared to face an ethereal enemy made for easy victims.

As a result, over the next few weeks she steadily progressed all the way up to Level 20. And as she grew in power, so did the dungeon's hold on her psyche weaken. It was at this point that Valeria found herself – almost unthinkingly – using her newly acquired Possession Skill on a cute, low-Level elf girl passing through the Green Zone. The barely-awake part of her that yearned to once again own a living body practically leapt at the chance to inhabit such a beautiful creature.

One of the woman's companions, a low-Level Priest, noticed her predicament almost immediately and directed the rest of her party to restrain her. His previous training had helped him to recognise the signs of an evil spirit within his teammate before she could harm any of her comrades. However, he lacked the necessary Skills and Spells to exorcise Valeria on the spot. Having no other choice, the Priest instructed the rest of his team to bind the elf-girl's limbs and get her back to town as soon as possible. The possessed victim had struggled, wailed and screeched, but lacked the physical strength prevent the group's burly Warrior from dragging her out of the dungeon.

It was upon crossing the dungeon's invisible boundaries that Valeria's link to the crystalline core was severed. She found herself a hostile spirit inhabiting a young woman's body against her will. Bound and gagged as she was, she could do nothing to speak or communicate with the young adventurers, but it gave her a good opportunity to properly come to grips with her situation. She remained in silent introspection until she realised that the party was taking her to the church, where she would undoubtedly be destroyed by a senior Priest.

Not wishing to taste death a second time, she quietly undid the Possession and withdrew to a side alley next to the church, watching silently from her hiding place as the group walked into the building. She knew a thing or two about the undead, enough to be aware of what a colossal mistake it would be to dare set foot on hallowed ground. Though she desperately wanted a beautiful flesh-and-blood body to call her own,

she regretfully abandoned the idea of pursuing that particular sack of meat any further.

She instead possessed the body of a homeless woman squatting in the basement of an abandoned house, a much easier target to dominate. After settling in, Valeria immediately tried playing with herself, desperate to once again experience the pleasures of the flesh. However, that didn't exactly work out. Even though she had a body, it was not one that belonged to her. The sensations it gave her were distant, disconnected, and somehow only made her even more frustrated.

She eventually gave up on her futile efforts at self-satisfaction and waited until nightfall, after which she began roaming the streets and alleys of Monotal. Valeria swiftly made her way towards her own house, a plain hovel at the edge of the slums. It had already been broken into, not surprising considering its only resident had been dead for weeks.

Rushing into her old bedroom, she dove under her bed to pry up a loose floorboard. Relief washed over her as she realised that the only truly valuable thing in that dump had been left untouched. Her slender hand reached into the secret compartment and withdrew a dusty, leather-bound tome.

This was her uncle's journal. She had managed to dredge up the memories of its existence after she'd calmed herself down somewhat, but part of her wished that she hadn't. The rotten, hateful old drunkard had abused and sexually assaulted her when she was still a child. His unforgivable behavior and her mother's unwillingness and/or inability to protect her only daughter had steadily turned the energetic and cheerful Valeria into a cold, twisted bitch. It was a change that had only truly manifested itself when she had murdered them both at the age of seventeen. As for her father, she'd never even met the deadbeat, though she was fairly sure she'd have killed him too if she'd ever gotten the chance.

With the only family she had dead by her hand, Valeria had quickly taken everything of value from her home and left that painful place behind. She had travelled alone through the Empire, whoring herself out to survive when necessary, or resorting to stealing if prostitution didn't work out. It was during this time that she'd developed her heretical 'hobby.' People in certain circles paid good coin for her so-called 'donkey shows,' and Valeria was both twisted and desperate enough to deliver some truly inspired performances. It wasn't long before she'd begun to enjoy the depraved acts,

to the point where she could no longer feel satisfied with a human or elven partner.

After several years of that lecherous lifestyle, she had finally saved up enough money to finance her adventuring career. Though it was a good way of making money, adventuring wasn't exactly free. Gear and equipment needed to be purchased, guild and training fees had to be paid, and on top of everything else she still needed food to eat and a place to sleep. That said, while she probably could've left her vagrant lifestyle behind much earlier, she had never regretted putting the transition off for so long.

The same could not be said about her decision to become a Necromancer, mostly because it had ended with her getting brutally murdered by a *box*.

And now here she was – a dead woman controlling the body of a starving vagrant. But the journal in her hands could hold the answers to her current dilemma, so she left the hovel behind to return to the abandoned basement. She thought about staying in her house since it was, after all, *her house*, but it just didn't feel right, somehow. Once safely back underground, Valeria spent the majority of the night poring through her uncle's journal.

The man in question had been an Enchanter working as a researcher for Arcaneum some forty years ago. His journal contained a multitude of interesting things that he probably was *not* supposed to have written down. He gave surprisingly detailed descriptions of the experiments he and his friends had performed on the undead in some remote outpost deep in the Sawblade Mountains. He had also gone into much *greater* detail describing the 'assets' of his female co-workers, which made Valeria want to puke. Though that could have been the rat that she had stuffed into her mouth to silence her rumbling stomach.

None of this was exactly news to her, though. She had skimmed through the book a few times before, but it still took her a while to find the information she was after. Her uncle's team had been studying a phylactery, a heretical vessel that allowed one to obtain the power and eternal life of a lich by storing their soul within it. The scholars were trying to learn if there was a way that it could be used to command the undead without sacrificing one's humanity. That last bit had always given the human Valeria pause whenever she'd considered retrieving the thing, but the banshee she had become no longer had such reservations.

This was the solution to her current problem. A lich's body was forged from mana by the power of the phylactery, allowing it to feel things that normal undead couldn't, such as touch, smells, taste, pain, and most importantly – pleasure. Supposedly, it wasn't *quite* the same as when they were alive, but it was without a doubt Valeria's best hope of finding a solution to her presently lifeless circumstances. And while the journal did not contain the actual instructions to create a phylactery, it gave her a lot of hints as to where she could start looking for the one described within its pages.

Which she did, almost immediately. Carrying things such as books and maps was tricky as a ghost, however, so she had to drag her pathetic meatsuit out of city bounds and into the wilderness. When a monster eventually killed her host body, she took over the creature instead, using its limbs to carry her physical possessions. She repeated the cycle several times as she made her way up the treacherous Sawblade Mountains, making such frighteningly fast progress that she never saw the flash of the dungeon core detonation that wiped out Monotal a mere three days after she'd left.

Eventually, she came upon the old research outpost detailed in her uncle's journal. The land surrounding it had already been tainted by Blight, meaning that this was undoubtedly the place. She set about searching the tower, using her incorporeal body to ferret out any secret rooms or compartments.

And, as luck would have it, she had managed to find an unused phylactery behind a bookshelf on the fourth floor, along with the notes detailing its creation. Valuable information, to be sure, though it seemed one needed to be at least a Level 80 Necromancer to reliably create one of the things. This particular outpost had been spearheading research on a method of mass producing phylacteries with the aim of somehow weaponising them. At least until their Imperial bosses had run out of patience and shut down the project, relocating both the people and their resources.

However, the researcher in charge of the place would have none of it. The man had spent over three decades on the project, and he had refused to allow his life's work to disappear so easily. Which was why he had selfishly hidden their jury-rigged phylactery and research notes, more to keep them out of the Empire's hands than anything else.

Now that Valeria thought about it, it was likely the phylactery's presence that was causing the Blight. Normally this sort of place would

have had people on hand to make sure that the undead plague didn't spiral out of control, but that only worked if there was someone willing to pay them to do it.

Though the documents Valeria had recovered had been most informative, they'd ultimately lacked the one thing she needed most – the method through which she could become a lich. She had wailed her frustration and rage, her voice echoing through the barren wasteland surrounding the tower. Eventually she'd realised that even if those eggheads had created an instruction manual for the phylactery, it was unlikely to be of any use to a non-human entity like herself.

That was it! She was a banshee now, and as such, she could do something no ordinary human could – she used her Possession Skill on the phylactery. Literally putting her soul into the fancy egg seemed to work, as it greedily accepted the offering and triggered a premature Rank Up into a Lesser Lich. It then created a remotely-controlled body for her out of pure mana, just as she'd hoped it would. Though the colouring was a bit off, it nonetheless bore a striking resemblance to her human form, especially the face, hair and figure. More importantly, however, it finally felt like her own body. Even her *special place* was fully restored to function, much to her great joy.

Valeria spent several hours doing nothing but pleasuring herself. She didn't need to eat or sleep, and never grew tired, so she just kept going at herself over and over and over. After relieving some of the stress and frustration that had built up after her death, however, she began to crave something… bigger. Her fingers just weren't enough anymore, and any undead she could create remained as ill-equipped for the task as ever. And even if she were to capture a random wolf or troll, it would be far too terrified to get in the mood, assuming that it didn't just die from the Blight.

Of course, that would no longer be an issue if she could manage to get her hands on a Monster Tamer Job… which was so far out of her reach it wasn't even worth thinking about. She decided to distract herself by raising her Jobs and Skills, which she was able to do with frightening speed, growing from a Level 20 Banshee to a Level 25 Banshee and Level 41 Lich in under two months. Which was right around the time she received an unexpected visit from a gnome Paladin and was murdered for the second time by one Boxxy T. Morningwood.

Her physical body regenerated next to the phylactery in the basement about an hour later. Having cooled down considerably by then, she was able to think through her options. Using her incorporeal form, a leftover from her Banshee days, she was able to confirm that the Mimic and its gnome were searching for something. And considering that the only thing of value in this shithole was her phylactery, she decided that it would be best to act quickly and just kill them off before they could find it. Their bodies should have been weakened by the Blight, so she'd decided to ambush them before they had a chance to leave and recover.

But she'd been over-eager, and her inexperience had led to the worst-case scenario. Her phylactery had been captured, and her spirit was now trapped within the dark, claustrophobic confines of its egg-shaped vessel. And while for some reason she was unable to regenerate her body, the fact that her gilded shell appeared to still be intact gave her some peace of mind.

Though it felt as though a few days passed like this, in reality it had been only around seven hours before her body finally began to regenerate. It appeared inside a shallow cave, which was obviously nowhere near her Blighted home. Valeria found herself staring down at a murderous box, a pint-sized Paladin with a crazed look in her eye, a heavily-breathing succubus holding a staff and a four-armed, gigantic fiend that looked as though she really wanted to smash something – or some*one* – into paste.

The undead woman briefly assessed the situation and, after confirming that her all-important phylactery was nowhere in sight, came to a singular, unfortunate conclusion:

...I'm fucked, aren't I?

Chapter Two
Unleashed
Part One

When the Mimic woke the next morning, it did so in its traditionally violent manner. It accidentally kicked the gnome sleeping next to it square in the head with a random limb that even its owner hadn't been aware of. The hit was a relatively light one that failed to make Fizzy stir, let alone wake her up. It had only been five hours since the abused woman had fallen asleep, so her current condition was not dissimilar to that of a rock.

Boxxy briefly considered the way that it had been treating the gnome up until now. It had failed to realise it at the time, but it now imagined that crude methods such as violence and fear could be unreliable means of keeping control in the long run. While they had certainly been effective, it nevertheless silently chastised its past, slightly dumber self for not thinking of a better way to keep the naive creature in line.

That said, it still hadn't thought up of an alternative method, so it decided that it might as well carry on as usual.

SMACK

"Ooof!"

It kicked Fizzy for real this time, sending her flying into the cave wall. She crashed into it head-first, fell to the ground, and promptly stood, healing herself with a Holy Light. After which she turned to greet the creature that was, essentially, her owner.

"G-Good morning to you too, Boxxy," she said, forcing a weak smile.

Though it was certainly violent, this sort of rough wake-up call was simply routine for her now. Besides, she had convinced herself somewhere along the way that the Mimic was only beating her for her own good. Vital survival Skills like Toughness, Holy Scriptures and Holy Mastery had all increased substantially over these past weeks, after all.

Of course, if anyone of sound mind had been around to hear that, they would probably have pointed out that she was clearly deluding herself. It was far more likely that the Mimic simply enjoyed punting her around. Which was, of course, completely accurate.

Thinking back on its methods of discipline, though, Boxxy once again concluded that fear and violence were perhaps not the best ways to keep

someone in check. After all, while its fear of that detestable man called Edward had kept it from acting out while he was around, it had only fuelled its desire to escape. Perhaps if it had been shown a bit of leeway, offered a deal, or even just fed something, it might have felt differently about the situation.

Granted, it would still have run away, but it might have hesitated for a second or two first.

The point was, fear alone was probably an insufficient means of controlling a monster, and the lich it had captured wasn't likely to respond to a simple thing like that. Boxxy expected that she would behave in the same way that it had during its own time in captivity – silently biding her time until an opportunity to escape presented itself. The same could be said of Fizzy, but the gnome had had every last bit of resistance thoroughly beaten out of her. An approach that had worked as well as it had only because she *wasn't* a monster.

Boxxy ordered Snack and Arms to stop playing around and come inside the cave to prepare for the confrontation with the lich. Just because it held her very life in its grasp didn't mean that she wouldn't lash out in desperation. The Mimic, in her position, would certainly have at least considered it. As such, after confirming a few things with Xera, it took the gilded egg from its Storage and hid it out of sight.

The lich's body began to materialise a short while later in much the same fashion that Xera and Kora's had, only without the light show. Brown, dirt-like particles swirled from thin air, constructing what appeared to be a floating clay statue of a nearly-naked woman. The spectacle took about five seconds, at which point the brown-and-grey figure abruptly came to life and its pigmentation changed to the familiar pale purple and bleak black.

Valeria opened her red-on-black eyes, observing the scene around her. Immediately, she appeared to arrive at a particularly depressing conclusion, as her shoulders drooped in defeat mere moments after taking in her surroundings. She had no out from the situation no matter how she looked at it, especially since her newly-formed body had a grand total of 0 MP. However, it was plainly obvious that her captors wanted something from her. Otherwise the animated chest that was clearly in charge would have already destroyed her phylactery. Granted, the item was sturdier than it looked, but even a goblin with a rock could crack it open if given enough time.

The lich let out a dejected sigh, then forced a bit of vigour back into her eyes as she stared resolutely at the short monster.

"So, you caught me. What happens now?"

Boxxy very much disliked being literally looked down upon. It was clearly in the position of power here, so why was it at the lower eye level? Admittedly, it didn't have any eyes at all, but it couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right with this scene. Hence why its lid sprang open and the fully-formed pseudo-Xera made her first reappearance in a long time. Both Valeria and Fizzy twitched a bit at the suddenness, shifting their gazes between the uncomfortable-looking succubus and her dumbly smiling albino clone as they tried to get a handle on the situation.

"I want you to work for me."

The strangely cheerful voice broke both the Paladin and the lich out of their respective stupors.

"… I'm sorry," Valeria said flatly. "Care to run that by me again?"

"I want you to work for me."

So, she had indeed heard right the first time. It wasn't quite what Valeria had been expecting, but that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

"Alright, I'll bite. Why?"

"Because you are strong. I need your help to get the things I want."

"Yeah? What things?"

"Tasty things."

Boxxy crossed its arms with a triumphant nod.

"Uh… What?"

Needless to say, the lich was a bit dumbfounded as to what in Teresa's tits it was talking about.

"When Master says something is tasty, that means it is a good thing," Xera explained. "More specifically, it is after Levels, gold, food, that sort of thing."

"Revenge, too," the Mimic added.

"Ah… I see…" Valeria murmured.

Truthfully speaking, she could sympathize with goals like that. Growing stronger through Level-ups was something she sought anyway, and while money was low on her priority list, she understood that it had value when dealing with others. Food, on the other hand, was something she no longer desired nor needed, though wanting revenge was certainly something she

could understand. However, pursuing it was sure to create a conflict of interests.

"And why would I willingly do something like that? You're the one who murdered me! Three times, at that!"

"Pfft. Amateur," Xera scoffed.

The Mimic graciously ignored its familiar and continued.

"Because you have tasty things you also want, right?"

Yet another response Valeria hadn't been expecting. She'd been sure that this monster would threaten her un-life, but it seemed as though it legitimately wanted to take part in some kind of give-and-take agreement. The lich honestly didn't know what to expect at this point.

"Wait, what exactly are you offering?"

Boxxy's head tilted dumbly to the side, its big red eyes blinking as it tried to remember the correct word.

"… Partnership? Yes, partnership," it stated.

"And if I refuse?"

"I kill you and keep the shiny."

It wasn't like Valeria hadn't seen it coming, but hearing the creature put it so bluntly with a smile on its face really struck a nerve. There was no doubt in her mind that it wouldn't hesitate to do it if she forced its hand. Tentacle. Whatever. Well, at the very least it wasn't trying to bullshit her, and she had definite confirmation that her continued existence was on the line, so that was something.

But then, why would it be offering a partnership? Surely, simply threatening her would have been enough? On the other hand, if she were forced to work like a slave she would likely resent it and plot the Mimic's downfall behind its back, whereas a mutually beneficial relationship would give her far less cause to object. There was just one glaring problem though – the idea of working with her own murderer left a bad taste in her mouth.

Or did it? She felt as though that should have been the proper response, but the more she considered it, the less appalling it seemed. The last vestiges of her humanity were arguing that she ought to despise her killer, yet somehow she couldn't bring herself to. While it was true that the Mimic had struck her down, that didn't necessarily mean that it bore any ill will towards her personally. In fact, she had actually obtained power much greater than anything she would have had while she had still been foolishly clinging to her humanity as though it mattered.

Ultimately, while she couldn't exactly thank Boxxy for killing her, she also couldn't necessarily fault it, either. After all, if their positions had been reversed, she probably would have done the same. Both her past and her current self would have trampled right over anyone who barged uninvited into her home, which was perhaps the main reason she'd been so angry at the sudden ambush in the first place. If not for that, perhaps the two of them wouldn't have needed to fight at all.

Then again, that thought raised a very important question.

"Can I ask you something?" she inquired, receiving a nod in response. "Why were you in that tower to begin with?"

"Had a Quest to defeat you."

"A Quest? Really? I don't think I've done much to get myself noticed by the guilds, though."

She had been keeping a low profile ever since she'd become a lich. While it was true that she had attacked some random travelers and passers-by, the actual number of her human victims could be counted on one hand. And those could easily have been misinterpreted as the work of random monsters, bandits or accidents. There certainly hadn't been enough to warrant a subjugation Quest just for her.

Then she remembered.

"Wait, the short one said something about a god, right?"

"Yes."

"… Well?"

"Well what?"

"Which god was it?!"

"God of Unlikelihoods," it answered simply.

"… There's one of those?"

"Yes."

"And he gave you a Quest?"

"Yes."

"Like, personally?"

"Yes."

"So… you… *met* a *god*?!"

"Yes."

"Why?! How?! What possible reason would there be for a God to bother with lowly monsters like us?!"

"He was bored."

“Gods can get bored?”

“Apparently.”

“And he sent you to me?”

“Yes.”

“Just for kicks because he was bored?”

“Yes.”

She thought for a moment. While the creature’s story was certainly outlandish, she had to admit that it certainly explained the otherwise-impossible reunion. How else would the very box that had murdered her have found her all the way out in the middle of bum-fuck nowhere? And if the Mimic was pragmatic enough to bother with these negotiations, then it wouldn’t have risked venturing so deep into Blight-infested territory without a good reason.

As absurd as it seemed, being sent by a bored deity looking to get a rise out of their interaction made a lot more sense than it should have. Still, just because the story made sense didn’t mean she could just take it at face value. If it was capable of rational thought, then it was also capable of lying to suit its needs if the situation demanded it.

“I’m having some difficulty believing you,” she stated flatly.

“Does that matter?”

“… No, I suppose it doesn’t.”

After all, actions spoke louder than words, and the Mimic’s current actions indicated two things: that it had already accomplished its objective in the tower, and that said objective did not involve Valeria’s destruction. Having more or less confirmed the monster’s intentions, the lich made her decision.

“Alright, you have a deal. I will agree to your proposal and help you with anything you want done to the best of my abilities.”

It was a painfully obvious and inevitable choice considering that the other party held her greatest weakness. No matter how she weighed the pros and cons of the unexpected offer, maintaining her continued existence had to take top priority. Sure, she would have to follow the orders of the stupid box-thing that had killed her, but at the very least it was offering certain benefits.

Speaking of which…

“In return,” she continued, “I want two things from you. First, you have to keep my phylactery safe.”

The creature had already proven itself to be unreasonably resilient. Having a sturdy meat shield like that protecting her soul's true vessel would be quite reassuring.

"You mean the shiny egg?"

"Err, right. That. Just keep it out of that Item Box Skill of yours, okay? It can't function properly from a place like that."

The Mimic stared at her silently. Did it have some issue with her request?

"Uhm, B-Boxxy," whispered Fizzy, "I think she means your, uh, Storage."

"Oh! Okay."

Boxxy had, of course, been planning to do that anyway. After all, it couldn't put her to work if it allowed her to be destroyed.

"Good," Valeria said. "As for the other thing I want… Uhm… That is- I just need-"

She couldn't say it. The words refused to leave her throat, as though something was keeping them from spilling out. She suddenly realised that she was about to say something truly outrageous, something that may have been a bit much, even for her. However, if she didn't speak up now, she might not get the chance later. Besides, surely, if anyone could understand, it would be a fellow monster, right? Valeria screwed up her courage, took a pointlessly deep breath, and screamed:

"I want to get fuuuuuuuucked!"

"…"

"…"

"…"

"…"

The ensuing silence was deafening. Fizzy assumed that she was so tired she must be hearing things, while the two demons stared at Valeria with a mix of awe and disgust. Even the Mimic, who was normally impervious to lewd topics, was stunned at her outburst.

"… Sorry, say that again?"

Valeria's eyes flew open and she panted heavily, a huge grimace threatening to rip her face in two. The cool and collected lich from just a few seconds ago was nowhere to be found, almost as if that side of her had never existed.

"You know what sex is, right?!" she asked in a shaky voice.

“Yes.”

How could it *not*? The two demons performed the act on a literal daily basis. It was only natural it that would at least grasp the concept, even if it personally couldn’t see the point in it.

“I want you to do that to me! Right here! Right now! Hard as you can! For as long as you can!”

The floodgates had opened, unleashing Valeria’s long-pent-up lust.

“Arms, Snack, take care of it,” Boxxy said matter-of-factly.

After all, why should the master have to bother with a chore if it already had two minions who were basically pros at it?

“Uhm, I don’t know, boss,” Kora spoke up. “I mean, I’ll gladly fuck anything with a pulse, but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t count.”

“I’d much rather be on the receiving end,” Xera grumbled.

It would seem that even a rape-happy demon had standards, while Xera had her own reservations about the idea. However, the two of them were forgetting something – they didn’t exactly have a choice in the matter.

“That’s an ord-”

“No!” Valeria interrupted, pointing directly at the Mimic. “Not them! You! With the tentacles!”

She’d be lying if she said that the thought had never crossed her mind. In fact, the very idea that she’d be violated by the very monster that killed was so outrageous, so *wrong* that it made her perversions run wild.

“I want you to shove them inside me!” she rambled, completely forgetting her position. “I want you to scoop out all of my holes and ravage me completely! I want to be stuffed so completely that I look like a bloated, sopping, wet mess!”

The Mimic quietly considered her words. For some reason, she wanted it to tend to her personally. She wasn’t asking for food, treasure or help with some impossible task, so it really had nothing to lose but time. However, time was not a luxury it had a great deal of, as the monster was fairly certain that Edward was still after it. Spending what little it did have on a chore that offered no tangible reward seemed like a waste of a valuable resource. It had both the ability and the intention of accommodating Valeria’s request, but it definitely wouldn’t be happy about it.

“Master, if I may make a suggestion?” Xera’s voice echoed through its mind.

“What?” it asked, annoyed.

Being stranded in the Beyond for a few weeks had given the succubus plenty of opportunities to plot and ponder. Though coming to terms with these unfamiliar feelings she had towards her Master was one of the topics she considered, there was another, equally important one. Namely, how to best convince her Master to satisfy her… special needs.

"Why not think of this as an opportunity to practice your Shapeshift Skill? You mentioned that you needed to create new and unique things in order to raise its Level, and you've yet to try the sort of things that that disturbed woman is requesting. You do need to max that out in order to Rank Up, don't you?"

Boxxy pondered the idea. It could find very little flaw in Snack's suggestion. In fact, it liked it quite a bit, and was suddenly eager to begin. Without warning, the fake succubus emerging from its maw began to shift and morph while listening to its raunchy familiar's whispered suggestions. The semi-human figure split into a dozen red, slimy tongue-tentacles, which wrapped abruptly around the lich's arms and legs, pulling her closer to the Mimic. Boxxy pinned her firmly to the ground, tore off the long bandage-like cloth that covered her naughty bits, and forced two of its appendages into her lower half.

Valeria let out a sound halfway between a scream and a moan. It was sudden and rough, just the way she liked it. The way the twin intruders changed their shape and girth as they adapted to her insides was unlike anything she had experienced before. It was so intense that there was no way for her to subdue her screams, even if she'd tried.

"Holy shit!" Kora shouted. "What the fuck?! The boss actually went and did it!"

Her surprise was understandable, as she hadn't been privy to her co-contractor's suggestion. The two of them were, after all, on separate mind links. She was still greatly amused by the sight, even if she had no idea what was happening.

"Waaaah!"

Fizzy, on the other hand, was far less enthusiastic. The obscenely bizarre display was just too much for a virgin like her to handle, and all she could do was look away and cover her ears while blushing fiercely.

"Me too, Master! Do me too!"

Xera was, to nobody's surprise, bouncing up and down, her arms waving excitedly as if hoping to be picked.

"Okay."

Boxxy had no reason to deny her, as Valeria alone wasn't remotely enough to challenge its shapeshifting prowess. A few of its tentacles split off to wrap themselves around the eager succubus, subjecting her to much the same treatment much to Xera's delight. However, the Mimic still had tentacles to spare, and it figured that, if it was going to be stuck doing this for a while, it might as well go all out. After all, the sooner it raised its Shapeshift to Level 10, the sooner it could Rank Up into a more powerful creature.

"Arms," it called.

Kora's eyes went wide as she realised what her master was about to do.

"Uhm… I-I think I'll pass. I'll be outside if you need me!"

She spun on her heel and made for the cave's entrance. She honestly didn't want any part of this. After all, unlike those two mega-sluts, she would much rather be doing the pitching than the catching.

Unfortunately for her, it hadn't been a request.

Two more tentacles shot from the Mimic's side, wrapping firmly around her ankles. The red-skinned fiend fell flat on her face as her legs were pulled out from under her and she was dragged along the cave floor. She resisted, but ultimately could do nothing once she was ordered to stop.

Just as Xera had suggested, growing all these limbs was excellent training for Boxxy's flesh-molding ability, both in terms of Skill Proficiency and practicing new shapes. It was almost at its biomass limit though, so couldn't do much more before it was tasked to capacity. The most it could squeeze into this practice session was something small and light. Something… gnome-sized.

And the perfect candidate just so happened to be just a few metres away.

It was a solid two hours before the Mimic finally ran out of steam. It released the women it had been fooling around with, allowing them to collapse in a sweaty, soggy heap on the floor.

Xera was in utter bliss. No matter how many times she'd tried to entice her beloved Master to properly violate her, it had always turned her down, saying that sex was a pointless exercise. She doubted whether even her brilliant suggestion would have been enough by itself to change the stubborn box's mind, so this development had been most fortuitous. She

almost wanted to thank the lich for serving as the trigger for this truly memorable event.

Kora, on the other hand, was feeling a bit conflicted. Originally, she hadn't wanted to take part in any of this, but she'd really gotten into it somewhere along the way. Figuring out an opponent's weaknesses and then mercilessly targeting them with pinpoint precision was Boxxy's preferred method of resolving conflicts, and it treated intercourse in much the same way. Even if the demon's nature abhorred being dominated by anyone, let alone a mortal, she hadn't been able to resist giving into the Mimic's onslaught. It had shown her that she could feel pleasure in ways she hadn't even been aware of, and that alone was more than enough to overwhelm her dissatisfaction. At the end of the day, experiencing new and exciting things was the main reason why demons agreed to summoning contracts in the first place.

Things were far less rosy for Fizzy, however. Though she'd wanted no part of the affair, she had ultimately been far too weak to stop Boxxy treating her like a plaything. While she had managed to endure weeks of constant mental and physical abuse, this had finally broken her. She remained motionless, her dead eyes gazing blankly. It didn't take a genius to see that she was utterly traumatised, driven to new depths of despair at the hands of the uncaring, selfish monster. It seemed that she was forever destined to be the creature's possession, but she was unable to find any joy in her servitude, unlike those demons.

As for Valeria, the impetus for the recent turn of events, she was finally satisfied. Completely, utterly, and unequivocally fulfilled. If this was always how the Mimic rewarded her, then doing its bidding seemed like a perfectly reasonable trade-off. So what if it had murdered her? She had felt more alive during these past two hours than she had in her entire life and un-life combined.

Boxxy, on the other hand, was regretting its actions. Much like every other new endeavour it'd set out on, it had overdone things and neglected its physical state like some kind of workaholic. This had left it not only profoundly hungry and thirsty, but also exhausted to the point where it felt as though it was about to black out. It made a mental note to be more moderate in the future, as depleting its stamina to this degree had left it momentarily vulnerable. On the upside, its Shapeshift proficiency had gone up by 14%, which was pretty impressive progress for only two hours of

work. Snack had also mentioned that she had some great ideas regarding how to take things further, and the Mimic was hopeful that it would be able to get the Skill to Level 10 in a reasonable amount of time.

[Your actions have altered the flows of chaos.]

Boxxy bolted upright at the new notification, scanning its surroundings warily. Its body was still a bit wobbly, but it nevertheless forced itself to be ready for anything. And something did indeed happen. Not to it, or any of its familiars, but to the lich. The bright red gem embedded in the valley of Valeria's breasts gradually turned from red to yellow. The crimson glow of her dot-like pupils also shifted into a distinctly more golden hue, making them seem almost like miniature suns floating through a pitch-black sky.

… Was this a good or bad thing? The Mimic desperately wanted to know, but it had no idea.

This was, after all, the first time its Agent of Chaos Skill had been triggered.

[General Information]

Valeria Vortena
Lich (Greater), Female, 2 months old
Level 25.00 Banshee (MAX)
Level 41.87 Lich
863/1018 HP (+0.0/sec)
2045/2045 MP (+1.8/sec)

[Attributes]

STR 8, DEX 6, AGI 18, END 202, INT 409, WIS 188, MNT 61, FTH -124, PER 21

[Banshee Skills]

Sonic Scream – Lvl 6.74
Mind Invader – Lvl 3.16
Detect Life – Lvl 5.43
Possession – Lvl 6.14

[Lich Skills]

Necromancy – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Lord of the Dead – Lvl 8.84
Hexcraft – Lvl 6.34
Physical Nullity – Lvl 4.05
Life Drain – Lvl 5.93

Permafrost Aptitude – Lvl 4.63
Anti-Magic Shell – Lvl 2.51
[Other Skills]
Ethereal Body – Lvl 6.77
Blight-Spawn – Lvl 3.15
Taboo – Lvl 5.69
Domination Mastery – Lvl 2.43
Permafrost Mastery – Lvl 3.77

Part Two

The Mimic and its posse were headed northwest through the mountainous wilderness while staying away from the Imperial highway. After some consideration, Boxxy had decided to leave the Empire's territory behind for good. It simply didn't feel safe being in the same country as the man called Edward, although one could argue that, given the Spymaster's prowess, nowhere was truly beyond his reach.

Another reason for its decision, though not immediately apparent, was the monster's desire to blend into civilised society. It would be difficult, true, but it would present the creature with numerous delicious opportunities to amass information, strength and wealth. The rewards were most definitely worth the risks, especially considering that someone was now actively hunting it. This time around, however, Boxxy planned to be far more cautious. It had made quite a few mistakes during its stay in Erosa, and as a result it had learned a great deal.

First of all, its chest-shaped body posed a significant problem. It had managed to get away with it somewhat by concealing itself in baggy clothing, but its towering figure simply stood out too much. That said, being easily recognisable was not without its benefits. The Mimic had learned the advantages of having a reputation when the dwarf called Grog had given it a few additional funds just before its capture. The problem was that the only humanoid form it could take was much too intimidating, which made people suspicious. And if the Mimic's instincts had taught it anything, it was that suspicious prey was a pain in the lid.

Therefore, since it currently lacked any other viable disguise options, it needed to Rank Up into something that could more freely change its form. Although it had some reservations about abandoning its square shell, it was hard to deny that 'treasure chest' was a poor choice of disguise outside of dungeons or warehouses. Besides, if it had the ability to freely change its shape, then there was nothing stopping it from reverting back to a chest if it ever felt uncomfortable. Just because it could be anything didn't mean that it had to be something different, after all.

The second order of business was evading Appraisal, though that was no longer an issue now that it had become a Hero. The Essence Concealment Skill would likely prove to be quite tasty once it got the hang

of it. Things like name, race and age could be chosen freely, but Jobs and Skills were a different story. Just as the ability's name implied, it could only hide the more practical parts of the Mimic's Status. It was impossible to show things Boxxy did not possess, meaning that there was no way to make the monster appear stronger than it was. While it certainly would've preferred to have that option, the Skill's ability to obscure its true nature was already more than enough.

Said main function was also surprisingly easy to use. After substituting its race, gender and age labels with less conspicuous identifiers, all that was left was to set its Mimic Job to 'hidden.' Doing so would automatically hide all related Skills and even adjust its Attributes, HP and MP accordingly. This conveniently allowed it to conceal the rather substantial gains it had received from Cadaver Absorption.

Perks could be hidden as well, which was equally important. While Boxxy wasn't *absolutely* certain, it could hazard a guess that having Butcher of Humanity on its fake Status was not a good idea. It was definite proof that the creature had killed at least five thousand people, which, as Snack pointed out, was not the sort of body count a respectable member of society would have.

However, simply concealing the Perk's existence would do little to solve the biggest problem it had encountered when blending in – the humans' instinctive fear of it. Based on its experiences in Erosa, and what it had overheard from Edward, Boxxy had deduced that it was Butcher of Humanity that had caused such unfavorable reactions. Or rather, there didn't seem to be any other explanation for why humans – and only humans – would react so negatively towards its disguise. Subconsciously broadcasting the fact that it viewed them as nothing more than sources of food and Levels was useful in a fight, but far less so if it wanted to interact with them in a nonviolent manner. It might have been possible to offset that particular side effect, but for the moment it seemed that Boxxy could never truly blend into human society.

Which was precisely why it was headed north, towards the Ishigar Republic. Judging from what it had heard about it during its stay in Erosa, it was an elf-run nation where humans were the minority. It wasn't ideal, but it was an infinitely better option than lingering in the Lodrak Empire, even without the looming threat of the Spymaster.

Then there was perhaps the most difficult hurdle it had to clear – learning to interact with people. Short, awkward words and nodding had worked in seedy places like the Mercenary Guild but were generally insufficient when dealing with people in the long term. It had made some steps towards learning proper conversation, but its facial expressions were abysmal, at least according to Snack.

It really couldn't help it, though. Mimics were born without faces, so it was only natural that Boxxy would have trouble controlling such a complicated and delicate set of muscles. Any face it created tended to twist into a goofy grin whenever it wasn't feeling angry or hungry. It had become something of an acquired reflex that the shapeshifter struggled to keep in check. And while one could certainly argue that constant smiling was hardly a bad thing, that clearly didn't apply to the slightly mad grin that Boxxy's faces usually settled into.

The expression was off-putting enough on its own, but downright creepy when used by a two-metre-tall, barrel-chested man in dark and baggy clothing. The sight had been so bizarre and unsettling that even non-humans had given 'Mister Morningwood' a wide berth when it had first tried it. Hence, it had always worn a face wrap that concealed all of its features aside from its gleaming eyes. As odd as it seemed, wearing a mask whenever it had gone out in public had been the least conspicuous option by far.

Last, but not least, Boxxy had to learn to read. Spoken language wasn't a problem thanks to the frequent telepathic communication it had with various demonic entities, whether it was Carl or one of its familiars. Exchanging thoughts allowed it to not only 'hear' the words, but also comprehend their meaning. Numbers were also easy enough to understand since basic arithmetic seemed to come naturally with INT and WIS growth. However, reading letters was an entirely different matter. Words were far more fluid and less strictly defined than mathematics, meaning there was simply no quick and easy way to learn the quirks and rules of written language.

And so, after thoroughly thinking matters through, the Mimic had compiled a short mental list of what it needed to accomplish, which at present looked something like this:

1. Rank Up.
2. Learn to read.
3. Learn to act.
4. Move to elven country.
5. ????
6. PROFIT!!!!

Boxxy was quite proud of its well thought-out and obviously foolproof plan. Surely nothing but good things could come from such a masterful design. Okay, admittedly it was a work in progress that still had a few kinks to be ironed out, but it was nevertheless a fairly solid plan, in its opinion.

"Boxxy!"

A cheerful, oddly melodic voice trilled affectionately, interrupting the Mimic's silent plotting. It had to grow a head on its backside in order to answer, as the person that had called was not, as one might expect, its succubus familiar. Nor was it the gnome that had had the profound misfortune of getting involved with it.

"What is it, Nasty?"

The one that had raised her voice was none other than Valeria, though the Mimic had already nicknamed her in accordance with her foul flavour.

Rather than being insulted, though, she actually seemed to enjoy the moniker, likely because she had misinterpreted as being 'nasty in bed.' This didn't seem to be her only delusion, as she had been acting especially friendly ever since her red bits had turned yellow earlier. She always had a wide, demure smile on her face, and the once-intense look in her eyes was much softer, as was her tone of voice. Especially when talking to Boxxy. The way she floated about was also odd. She would lean forward constantly, presenting her sizeable breasts to the monster even though it clearly had no interest in such things. Plus, she had gotten into the habit of hovering, both figuratively and literally, in close proximity to the Mimic.

Her lovestruck behavior was horribly mismatched with her new identity as an undead abomination, but the lich was definitely acting like she had developed a crush on Boxxy. Not that the Mimic had been able to deduce that on its own. It lacked the capacity to form or even understand emotional attachments like love or friendship, and would probably still be clueless as to why the undead woman was acting so clingy if it hadn't consulted Snack on the matter.

The trigger for the lich's drastic and completely unnecessary shift in personality had undoubtedly been the 'practice session' a few hours ago. Or, more specifically, the infuriatingly cryptic Agent of Chaos Skill which had somehow activated itself afterwards. Granted, Nasty fawning over Boxxy could be a good thing in the long run, but it didn't exactly appreciate the attention at the moment.

"What are you thinking about?" her sickeningly sweet voice asked.

"Planning," it replied curtly.

"Oh my!" she squealed. "Already making preparations for our marriage?!"

"No."

It had no intention of attempting to understand or even acknowledge Valeria's advances, let alone reciprocate. She truly was delusional if she thought her womanly charms could somehow entice or seduce the Mimic, which nobody understood better than Xera. Consequently, the succubus was still able to follow her beloved master happily without a single shred of jealousy towards the newbie. Rather than cause needless internal strife by butting in, she simply let the silly lich do as she pleased. Sparking competition between the two them would have been utterly pointless, anyway. The succubus was confident that her exquisite flavour was far more appealing to Boxxy than undead flesh conjured from dirt.

Not to mention that Xera and Boxxy were already bound together by a contract far more powerful than something as silly as 'marriage.'

Kora, of course, was the same as always. She strolled idly in front of the group, keeping an eye out for trouble and not caring in the slightest what those horny bitches in the back were doing. From her perspective, the intense session earlier had been little more than a weirdly pleasant albeit slightly awkward memory. It was not something that she was particularly interested in repeating. She wasn't so weak-willed as to be swayed by a single fuck, and still viewed the Mimic as nothing more a fun master and a fighter worthy of respect.

As for Fizzy, she hadn't recovered from her ordeal in the slightest. She obediently followed after Boxxy, but her soulless eyes and stiff movements were more like a mechanical doll's than a person's. She was still dealing with the indescribable trauma of being sexually assaulted by an uncaring creature that had already spent weeks beating and abusing her as it saw fit.

She felt disgusted, violated and enraged, though she couldn't let any of that show for fear that the beatings would resume.

Part of her had started to outright hate Valeria for serving as the catalyst to that particular nightmare. Not to mention the way she was fawning over Boxxy, which was so sickening that it made the gnome want to smash her phylactery into tiny pieces, set them on fire, and take a literal shit on them. Not necessarily in that order. However, that obviously wasn't an option given Boxxy's intention to use the lich for its own gain. That was why the only thing she could do at the moment was try her best to ignore the repulsive heretic.

"Aww, that's a shame…" Valeria pouted. "Then what are you planning, honeybuns?"

However, neither she nor the rest of the group were prepared for Boxxy's answer.

"Operation TASTYCOCK."

The entire party ground to a halt. Kora struggled valiantly not to laugh, while Xera's face split into a malicious grin. Valeria and Fizzy could only stare blankly in stunned surprise.

"Uh- Uhm… Th-th-that is," stammered the lich, "what do you mean by tas… tasty cocks?"

"Tasty And Shiny Things Yielded by Chesting Or Cheap Killing."

"Pfuahahaha! AH HAHAHAHAHA!"

Kora roared with laughter as she clutched her stomach and fell to the ground. She reached up to high-five Xera, the prankster who was undoubtedly responsible for teaching Boxxy that obscene acronym. Relief washed over Fizzy as she saw their interaction and realised that it hadn't said that because it was 'in the mood.' She wasn't sure how her mind had jumped to that conclusion, but it had paralysed her so completely that she had literally forgotten to breathe.

She then realised how ridiculous the notion had been. Though she was fuzzy on the details, she remembered reading that mimics were genderless monsters that lacked the ability to reproduce. The notion that such a being was even physically capable of sexual arousal was so crazy that the gnome felt incredibly foolish for even considering it. The awkward feeling, however, was immediately drowned by the ocean of negative thoughts swimming in her head.

Meanwhile, Valeria seemed to have finally gotten the message that she was not desirable to Boxxy in the slightest, causing her shoulders to droop in morbid disappointment.

Despite all this, the Mimic had interpreted their reactions as a generally positive response. It had spent nearly an hour discussing the matter with Snack before they had arrived at 'Operation TASTYCOCK,' so it was reassuring to see that the time spent hadn't been a total waste. Though it wasn't as if the name was all that the two of them had talked about. A good portion of the conversation had also been spent determining the optimal methods for completing the plan's various objectives.

For instance, learning to read, write, and interact with people were all things that it could learn from Snack. Though she appeared to have a one-track mind, the succubus was the smarter of the two familiars by far. She was also significantly more trustworthy than either Fizzy or Nasty since she could be ordered to speak only the truth. There would be plenty of time to learn from her as they travelled to the northern Republic, and if Boxxy's acting skills weren't quite up to snuff by the time they arrived…

Well then, that simply meant that it would have to spend more time practising in the wilderness.

However, their party wasn't heading directly north. Their current heading was actually west-by-northwest. The detour had been deemed necessary in order to allow Boxxy to address the first and most vital part of its plan – achieving a Rank Up. Maxing out the Shapeshift Skill was something that it could do more or less anywhere, but it needed to challenge sufficiently powerful opponents if it was to get those last three Levels of its Mimic Job.

Thankfully, according to Nasty, there happened to be a dungeon in this direction. She had allegedly gone inside by accident while searching for that old Arcaneum tower, before she had turned herself into a lich. Boxxy wondered how anyone could possibly confuse a tower with a dungeon, but it received its answer the instant they arrived.

[You have entered the Spire of the Jade King.]

The notification popped up just as a huge black tower came into view. The structure appeared roughly forty metres tall and half as wide, with a notable lack of windows or balconies. It was hard to tell from a distance, but the outside wall was so perfectly smooth that it looked to have been

hewn from a single piece of black stone, rather than cobbled together from brick and mortar. At a second glance, the Spire looked less like a man-made structure and more like a gigantic rock sticking out of the ground. It was also surrounded on all sides by hundreds of metres' worth of tall, dense hedges that formed a kind of complex maze.

Boxxy quickly and quietly scouted the perimeter, confirming what Valeria had said regarding the residents of the tall green corridors. The place was filled with living stone statues that marched in strict formation as though they were some kind of military outfit. Their appearance was clearly modeled after someone's vision of the 'ideal' human male and did not appear to be all that realistic. Their ripped abs, slim physiques, well-toned musculature, handsome faces and generously sized packages were so over-the-top that even Boxxy was finding it hard to take them seriously.

That said, even if they were technically naked, the statues were hardly defenceless. They were a type of golem, a magical construct of animated stone, which meant that their bodies were much tougher than the flesh of actual humans. They also carried enormous, body-covering shields and massive spears, all made from yet more stone. It was obvious that the things could both take and dish out ridiculous amounts of punishment, but there was an upside to the situation. Golems were simple, straightforward creatures that only engaged their enemies in direct close quarters combat. Granted, the stone soldiers seemed significantly more coordinated than one might expect from a bunch of brickheads, but they still lacked any form of magical or ranged support.

Boxxy determined that this would be a good place to check on the growth of its minions. It had been steadily gaining INT over these past three weeks by gaining Levels in its Mimic Job and various related Skills, and with its other Jobs restored it now had significantly more MP than when it had been captured. The extra juice meant that Xera was currently a Level 27 Succubus and Level 20 Pyromancer, while Kora was a Level 27 Fiend and Level 20 Berserker. At 2120, the latter's HP had even slightly surpassed the Mimic's, though her MP was as abysmally low as ever.

Regardless, both of them had a few new Skills each, not to mention that the Mimic had yet to see Valeria really get serious. They had run into a few attackers on their way to the dungeon, but they hadn't even been a challenge for the travelling monster troupe. It was important that Boxxy

know just how strong the minions it had at its disposal were, and this was as good a place as any to test things out.

After scoping out the area a little further, the Mimic returned to the dungeon's outskirts, where its posse had been told to wait quietly for its return.

"U-uhm… B-B-B-Boxxy…"

The monster's brief absence had given Fizzy the courage to speak up for the first time since she had been raped.

"What?"

"Th-th-the, uh, th-that…"

Then again, perhaps 'speak' was too strong a word. She was still simultaneously exhausted, traumatised, terrified, and furious, so she was having some trouble articulating her words. She couldn't even look directly at the chest-shaped monster and instead stared intensely at her own feet while her tiny voice leaked from her dry throat.

"I n-n-n-need to get s-s-supplies… F-fresh food and wa- water… Since my old ones were ra- uh, Blighted…"

It had been more than twenty-four hours since she'd last had a solid meal. She'd managed to fill her canteen with water from a small stream they had passed on the way, but she had already drunk it all in an ultimately misguided attempt to fill her belly.

"Also… I need s-s-s-sleep… Like… a l-lot…"

There was also the matter of her depleted stamina. It was nearly evening, and they had perhaps two hours before the sun set completely. The group had been walking for most of the day, draining what little physical strength she had left. Her already sleep-deprived body had been running on empty in pretty much every sense of the word and would have already collapsed if not for the END holding her up. She was certainly in no condition to spend hours, maybe even days tackling a dungeon full of traps, monsters, and Jeramiah knew what else.

"C-c-can we r-rest? P-p-p-p-please?" she begged, barely holding back tears.

Boxxy was troubled by this. While it was true that they were in no particular rush, it didn't feel like waiting around, either. If the gnome's biological needs were going to keep getting in its way, then they would have a problem. She was the only one who needed to be pampered like this.

Boxxy's constitution was much stronger than the gnome's, so it could last significantly longer without food or sleep. Admittedly, it also required an enormous amount of nutrition, but it was a far less picky eater than Fizzy. Xera and Kora were both demons, and as such didn't need food or water at all. Or sleep, for that matter. Though they did get tired, they could just be re-summoned in order to instantly fix the problem. And Valeria was the least demanding of all. She was undead, meaning that she needed zero rest or sustenance. All her body required was that her phylactery be safe and relatively close by. Which, of course, it was, as it was currently tucked away in the fleshy sack at the base of Boxxy's huge tongue.

However, it would seem the lich still had an opinion to offer on the matter of sleep.

"Boxxy, I think you should let the poor thing rest."

Fizzy's eyes widened in shock.

"She's only a gnome," Valeria continued. "If you don't let creatures like her properly recover from their fatigue, then their performance will drop, and they can make crucial mistakes in combat."

"Huh. I suppose that's true, isn't it?" the Mimic stated, as if only now realising what should have been common sense.

"It is. Besides," she added, "I also need some time to hunt for fresh bodies and replenish my own minions. I can't make undead out of rocks, twigs and dirt, you know. So how about you let her rest while I do that?"

"… Yeah, okay," Boxxy finally gave in. "You and Fizzy go hunt, get meat and zombies."

"Yes, my darling!" she chirped.

"Snack, go with them and guard the small one. Make sure she doesn't die."

"Understood, Master," Xera gave a small bow.

"Arms, you're with me. Let's go see how strong those golems are."

"You got it, boss!"

The five of them split up, with Xera, Valeria and Fizzy going away from the dungeon in search of prey while Boxxy and Kora prepared themselves for-

"Oh, crap!" the Mimic shouted suddenly.

"Hm? What's wrong, boss?"

Boxxy had just realised: It had used one of its precious mithril daggers as a projectile weapon during its brief bout with Valeria. However, in all the excitement of completing the Quest, getting its Jobs restored and being reconnected with its familiars, it had completely forgotten to pick it up.

Meaning that it was currently laying on the fourth floor of the abandoned Arcaneum tower, at least half a day's walk away.

Part Three

A lich, a Paladin and a succubus walked into a forest. Although it seemed like the beginning of a bad joke, it was currently Valeria, Fizzy and Xera's reality. The gnome glanced up at the floating undead several times before screwing up the courage to speak.

"Uh… uhm… Valeria?"

"Hm? What is it, little one?"

"Why did you stand up for me back there?"

"Oh that? I was simply doing my duty."

"What duty?"

"What sort of worthless woman would let her future husband's precious little pet waste away like that? You're so small and fragile that I couldn't help myself."

Anger flared once again in Fizzy's eyes. The rage, which had been dulled somewhat by the Mimic's ridiculously named 'Operation,' returned full force and then some. Not because Valeria had called her a pet. Though she likely intended it as an insult, it would probably be an upgrade from the position of 'property' that the gnome had reluctantly resigned herself to. What truly made her mad was that this incorrigible pervert had taken pity on her.

"No need to thank me," Valeria grinned, inadvertently adding more fuel to the flame.

The gnome's grip on her oversized wrench tightened, and she gritted her teeth angrily. Did this insufferable bint not realise just whose *fault* it was that she was so miserable? She wanted to take a swing at this piece of trash and smash her teeth in so badly that it almost overpowered her sense of reason. 'Almost' being the operative word. The difference in their Statuses and Levels meant that act would be equivalent to suicide. Even if Paladins were the natural enemy of undead, liches were their antithesis, and were well-equipped to fight the living. A fight between the two of them at this stage was sure to end in the gnome's demise.

Not to mention that even if Fizzy pulled off a miracle and won, Boxxy would never let her off with just a few little 'love taps.'

"Sorry to break this up," Xera butted in, "but the Master just informed me it has need of the lich."

“Really?!” Valeria exclaimed, the yellow points of her otherwise-black eyes flaring dangerously.

“Yes. Something about having to go back to the white tower.”

“Then I shall return to my darling’s side immediately!”

The lich bolted back the way they’d come, twirling merrily through the air like a leaf on the wind.

The reason Boxxy had called her back was because it wanted to return to the tower to retrieve its forgotten dagger. Even though it wouldn’t be particularly useful against golems, that didn’t mean that it could just leave one of its most treasured shinies behind. Unfortunately, the Blight-infested stretch of land surrounding the tower was crawling with undead, which would make the trip much more annoying and time consuming than it had any right to be.

Which was where Valeria came in. The lich had bragged at length about her Skills shortly after she’d been recruited, and the Mimic was particularly interested in her Lord of the Dead Skill. According to Valeria, it was a lich-exclusive ability that no human Necromancer could ever hope to obtain. It not only strengthened all minions under her command, but also allowed her to dominate and control the feral undead that appeared naturally due to the Blight. Assuming she was telling the truth, she could direct all those rotting vermin away from Boxxy, allowing the Mimic to travel unhindered. This would not only give her the chance to rebuild her undead army, but would also allow Fizzy plenty of time to rest and recuperate.

The Mimic had decided on this course of action because it had determined it to be the most efficient. It was most assuredly *not* going to be the romantic moonlit walk that the delusional lich was likely imagining.

Now that it was just Fizzy and Xera, the gnome found herself temporarily at a loss.

“You should get busy,” the succubus suggested. “It would be quite troublesome if your pitiful performance were to become a burden to my Master.”

“Ah… Right. Th-then you will help me hunt, right? The f-faster I get what I need, the l-less of a burden I’ll be…”

“Ahhh, I suppose that’s true. Very well, I’ll back you up.”

The two of them roamed the sparsely forested area for a while before they ran across a large black bear, which was soon charred even blacker

when Xera's magic killed it instantly. While it may have been enormous, and certainly looked menacing, it was no match for a Spell-slinging demon that completely overwhelmed it in terms of Levels.

Fizzy took out her dagger and began to carve the meat into appropriately-sized steaks. She would grill them up, eat her fill, and preserve the rest with the salt she'd found in Boxxy's Storage.

The succubus sat down on a nearby rock, watching her work with a vaguely dissatisfied look on her face. Her glare made the Paladin more than a little uneasy.

"D-Do you hate me?" she finally asked.

The gnome's choice of conversation topic was perhaps a little weird, but the succubus was already feeling bored. Exciting and fun things happened all the time whenever her beloved Master was around, but that also meant that things were incredibly dull whenever it wasn't. Therefore, she felt she might as well indulge Fizzy with a bit of idle chatter to kill time.

"I do."

"Oh…"

"Don't take it personally. I dislike all mortals that aren't Master. Also most demons. And all but one god. I don't really have a shit list so much as a not-shit list. And even that has only six names on it."

"… I see."

Silence once again reigned, broken only by the wet sound of the knife digging into flesh.

"… Can I ask what your real name is?"

"You know there's no truth to the myth that you can control a demon if you know its name, right?" Xera rolled her eyes.

It wasn't an entirely unfounded notion since names were incredibly important when it came to summoning contracts, but it was still a ridiculous idea.

"Th-that's not it! It's just that, your name isn't actually Snack, is it?"

"Hmm… Actually, you're right. It isn't. I should see if I can get it changed."

"… I'm sorry, what?"

"I am my master's Snack. Is it really so wrong for my name to reflect that?"

"You… You *like* being eaten?!"

"Of course I don't, you foolish creature. I love it. I adore it! I *need* it! Being devoured the instant I was back in the physical realm was the best welcome back gift I could've asked for! Hnnn! Just thinking about it is… Mmmmnn!"

Realization dawned as Fizzy watched the succubus's expression contort with lust. Come to think of it, hadn't this demon also eagerly shouted, 'Do me! Do me!' during this morning's incident?

"That is why I'm sure I will never lose to that uppity ghost. Master likes my flavour the best!"

That's not something to be proud of! Fizzy shrieked internally.

Still, that made it official: The number of incorrigible perverts around Boxxy was not one, but two. Actually, given this pattern, it was highly likely that the red demon was just as bad. How had they all managed to congregate around a creature with absolutely no sex drive!? The Mimic had made it clear that it did not enjoy the act and simply used it as 'practise' to increase its Skill. Which the gnome was inclined to believe, given that it hadn't assaulted her in all this time. If it weren't for Valeria, she wouldn't be in this situation, where she felt disgusted to be inside her own body. Then again, making the pain stop would be so easy. All she had to do was take the knife in her hand and drag it across her –

Fizzy immediately shook away the dangerous thought that had crept into her skull. She decided that it would be best if she simply ignored the hopeless slut of a demon and focused herself entirely on preparing the bear's meat. After separating what looked to be the best pieces, Fizzy fired up her mana-fuelled welding torch and grilled them thoroughly. She gorged herself on as much of the tough, bland meat as she could stomach, then packaged the rest for later. It could probably last her for a few more days before it went bad.

Once she was finished, she walked over to a soft-looking patch of grass and fell like a sack of turnips, slipping into a coma-like sleep the instant her head hit the ground. She was so tired that she couldn't even dream, let alone have nightmares, though it wouldn't be a stretch to say that the real nightmare was when she was awake. But, at least for tonight, circumstances had conspired to allow her a proper rest for the first time since she'd been imprisoned. She slept from sundown until well after sunrise for a total of thirteen hours.

The gnome sprang to her feet the instant she regained consciousness and looked around in panic. She was so used to being woken up with violence that her subconscious mind had perceived her late, peaceful morning as a matter of concern. It took her several seconds before she had woken completely and several more before she reassured herself that she wouldn't be beaten for oversleeping. It was only then that she managed to calm herself down.

Looking around, she saw that the succubus was exactly where she'd been when Fizzy had fallen asleep – sitting idly on a nearby stump and staring off into the distance. The entire area was covered in scorch marks, suggesting that the demoness had taken to flinging Fireballs at random to alleviate her boredom. There were also some charred lumps of meat here and there, presumably from monsters stupid enough to cross her line of sight.

She didn't seem to notice that the gnome had woken up, so Fizzy decided to call out to get her attention.

"G-good morning."

Xera's eyes turned away from the horizon to stare contemptuously at the pint-sized Paladin.

"Oh, finally awake?"

"Y-yeah."

"I hope you got plenty of rest and do not embarrass my Master."

"I won't. Trust me, upsetting Boxxy is the least- the last thing I want to do," she sheepishly twiddled her thumbs.

"Hmmm. Well, so long as you understand."

"And uh, wh- where is-"

"On its way back," the succubus interrupted her. "I think they'll be here in about half an hour, so we'd better get back to the dungeon."

"Alright. You, um, you didn't do anything weird to me while I slept, right?"

This was an entirely valid concern. Xera had been the one who had manipulated Fizzy's memory back in Erosa, and she always did it after putting the gnome to sleep with magic. There was no telling whether she might've done the same last night, especially considering her deceitful nature. The fact that the succubus didn't answer with words but instead with a mischievous smile did little to reassure the gnome.

“Hey! You didn’t do anything, right?!”

The worried Paladin kept asking but received no response as the two of them walked towards the tall black spire in the distance. It was very possible that Xera hadn’t actually done anything and was simply stringing the poor girl along just for kicks, but Fizzy couldn’t simply accept such a naive answer. She searched her memory in an effort to spot anything out of place, any potential time she might have lost. Unfortunately, it was all there. The imprisonment, the abuse, the misery, the assault… all of it was there in such vivid detail that they made the gnome even more depressed when she dredged them up.

She kept worrying over what Xera might’ve done as they made their way back to the Spire of the Jade King, arriving at roughly the same spot where the group had split up the day before. Kora sat casually on the ground as if waiting for them.

“Yo!”

She greeted the pair with a wave of her hand.

Her *only* hand.

“Ack!”

Fizzy recoiled in horror as she realised that the mountain of muscle had been mutilated horribly. She was missing both left arms, half a right arm and most of her left leg. Large chunks of her left torso had been gouged out, and both of her magnificent metal horns had been broken off almost entirely.

“Are you okay?! What happened to you?!”

“Nothing much. I was just giving those golem guys a try to see how strong they were, and I got a bit carried away and challenged three of them at once a couple of times.”

“So? How were they?” Xera asked curiously.

“They’re hard, and faster than they look. I’d guess about as strong as a Level 60 or so adventurer. They’re good with those shields, and the spears are pretty bad as well, but those short swords are the worst. They’re much sharper than they look.”

She wiggled her stumps, as if to prove her point.

“Swords? What swords?” asked Xera.

“They pull them out from somewhere if you break their shafts. They get super pissed and start attacking like mad. Must have some golem-specific

Enrage Skills."

The abilities she was referring to would trigger, usually automatically, whenever their user got hit in a weak point, had their HP reduced below a certain threshold, or other such unfavourable circumstances. Though the exact activation conditions varied from one Skill to the next, they all shared the trait that they were not preemptive measures, but reactionary ones. Their effects were also far more potent than other Skills, making them the perfect tool for turning the tables at the last moment.

The Berserker Job had quite a few of those abilities at its disposal, which was why and how Kora knew so much about them.

"Hmpf," Xera scoffed. "Shouldn't be a problem once Master gets back."

"Yeah. Wish it'd hurry up already, though."

"... How can you two be so calm?!" Fizzy shrieked. "Bitchface lost two arms and a leg, and you two are just-"

"You wanna die, you little shit?!"

"Waaah!"

Kora's casual air disappeared in an instant as she let her bloodlust flow, and the poor gnome could do little more than scream at the unexpected threat and jump behind Xera for cover.

"Come on," the fiend growled at her. "Call me that again! See what happens!"

She stood on one leg, taking a few threatening hops towards Fizzy and the slightly sniggering succubus. The fact that she was missing a full third of her body mass somehow made her even more intimidating in the smaller woman's eyes.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I don't know what I said, but I'm sorryyyy!" she pleaded.

"Like fuck you don't know! I told you to only call me by my name, didn't I?!"

"But I did! It's Bitchface McWeaksauce, isn't it?! … Huh?"

Kora had grandly introduced herself yesterday, so Fizzy was dead certain she'd gotten her name right. So how come it didn't *feel* right? The fiend in question felt her anger subside a bit at the strangeness of the situation. Her eyes moved between the succubus and the gnome, as if she were trying to piece something together.

“You… Your name was Corny Fizzle-something, right?”

“N-no. It’s Cornhole Jizzbu… cket?”

“…”

The fiend and the gnome stared at each other in confusion, until the awkward silence was suddenly broken by Xera, who could no longer contain her laughter.

“Ahhhh-hahahaha! Hah hah haaaahahaha!”

It was a rapid, joyful, mocking laugh that made it abundantly clear that she was laughing at them, not with them.

“You whore!” Kora roared. “I’ll get you for this!”

Realising exactly which part of her memory had been tampered with seemed to dispel the effects of the Dreamweaver Skill from Fizzy’s mind. The implanted memories faded away and the real ones rose to the surface. The realisation that Xera had indeed tampered with her mind made the gnome so angry that she seemed to come right back around to a strange calm.

“Uhm, excuse me, Koralenteprix?” she asked, an almost innocent smile on her lips.

Hearing someone properly call her by name drastically improved the fiend’s mood, and she gave Fizzy a toothy smile while puffing out her chest.

“Yep, that’s me!”

“Can you hold down Snack for me, please?”

“You don’t have to tell me twice!”

The fiend leapt through the air and crashed right into the still-giggling succubus, knocking them both to the ground and pinning her under her weight. Fizzy stepped over to the slightly-stunned Xera’s head and gripped her tool-turned-weapon with both hands.

THWACK

She smashed the succubus’s face in repeatedly as Kora kept her pinned to the ground.

THWACK

Fizzy did not hold back in the slightest as she really put her back into each downward swing.

THWACK

Both Kora and Xera were a Warlock's familiars. That meant two very important things: they were unable to go against direct orders, and re-summoning them would get rid of any and all injury, even death.

THWACK

Boxxy had explained this to both Fizzy and Valeria the day before. However, in her shock at seeing Kora's mutilated form, Fizzy had briefly forgotten.

THWACK

But now that she remembered, she rationalised that it was fine to kill the bitch, right?

THWACK

It was what the masochistic whore seemed to want, so it was fine if she smashed her head open like a fucking tomato, right?!

THWACK

She stopped after the seventh hit, holding her bloodied wrench over her head. Was it really okay? She decided to ask Kora, just in case.

"It's fine if I smash her to death, right?"

"Probably not," the fiend said. She sounded disappointed. "The boss has to waste MP bringing her back, and that makes it a bit cranky."

"Oh…"

"I think she's good for one more hit though."

"Oh!"

THWACK

Fizzy exhaled as she felt her tense body relax. She put away her weapon and smiled weakly at Kora.

"Thanks. I really needed that. Hitting things in the face is strangely relaxing, huh?"

Even though violence was the primary cause of the gnome's stress, it had nevertheless been just the outlet she'd been looking for.

"I know, right? I gotta say, you hit well for a pipsqueak!"

"Could you not call me that?"

"I call 'em as I see 'em, pipsqueak. I mean, you're so tiny you barely come up to my kneecaps!"

"Bet I'm taller than you when you're at 0 HP."

"Oh? Is that a challenge?"

The fiend glared at the gnome, her eyes glinting with more of the primal bloodthirst that only a fiend could conjure. Her stare alone was enough to make chills run down Fizzy's spine.

"E-easy now. Y-you can't kill me, remember? Your boss forbade you!"

"Who said anything about killing?" Kora spoke in a low, slow rumble. "I can still bitchslap you for being an uppity cunt who doesn't know her place. That would only *mostly* kill you."

Whatever confidence Fizzy had gained from hitting Xera disappeared in an instant and she bowed down on all fours, her forehead touching the ground. It was a magnificent grovel, a perfect ten out of ten if someone were to put a score on it.

"I'm sorry! I got carried away and became cocky! Please forgive me, Miss Koralenteprix! Ma'am!"

"Yeah, that's what I thought, *pipsqueak*."

Part Four

"Welcome back, Master."

Xera greeted Boxxy respectfully upon its return. Her face had completely recovered from being smashed in by a pissed off gnome thanks to her shapeshifting abilities. Even if the Mimic didn't particularly care about it, she couldn't possibly allow her beloved master to see such a shameful sight. Unless, of course, it would earn her the rapturous torture she desired.

"Hey boss!" Kora said casually. "Anything exciting happen while you were gone?"

"Nope. Got my shiny dagger back with no problems."

"Huh? Then where's the lich?" she asked while looking around.

"Dropped Nasty off on the way," Boxxy answered. "She's getting her undead together and said she'll need a while to prepare."

"Oh. So… can you do something about *this,* now?" she wiggled her stumps.

The Mimic responded to her request by forcefully dismissing, then re-summoning her. Once the fiend had all her limbs back, Boxxy finally turned its attention towards the gnome, forming a head in order to address her.

"Did you sleep well?"

"Wh-what? I mean, yes! I slept very well!"

She wasn't just saying so, either. The Paladin looked noticeably healthier than she had yesterday.

"Good."

Boxxy had done a great deal of thinking during the night, mostly about the gnome, and it had realised that it was simply pushing her too hard. At first it had been because it had felt rushed by the Quest's ambiguous time limit, but that was no longer the case. While the Spymaster was no doubt still hunting it, the Empire was a huge place, so the Mimic could afford to slow down and treat Fizzy with a bit more care.

"From now on," it continued, "tell me if you feel tired or hungry, and I will let you rest."

"Wh- R- Really?!"

"Yes."

It had decided to think of her not as a mushy meat-thing, but a tool or a weapon, one that would break and rust without proper upkeep. Granted, the Mimic had never bothered doing maintenance on any of its gear or weapons

before, but it nevertheless understood the concept. The only difference was that Fizzy required food and rest instead of sharpening and polishing. Her performance hadn't been especially great, but the survival instincts that Boxxy had drilled into her would surely make her a valuable asset further down the line. As long as she maintained that 'eat or be eaten' mentality and proved herself loyal, it might even decide to keep her around once it had finished absorbing her Artificer knowledge.

"Then I shall t-t-take you up on your offer!"

As for Fizzy, she wasn't sure what had prompted this, but she certainly wasn't about to look a gift chest in the hinges. Assuming that Boxxy was being truthful, this would eliminate one of her biggest gripes with the way she was treated. She was inclined to believe the creature, as the beatings had decreased drastically in both frequency and intensity after the fight with the lich. Except for the rape. Though the Mimic had not injured her physically, the wound its thoughtless actions had left on her psyche cut deeper than any blade and hurt worse than any bone fracture. It was not the sort of thing that could be healed by something as basic as food and sleep, but Fizzy had to take whatever silver lining-

"Also, sorry about yesterday morning."

The gnome's eyes widened to the point where they looked as though they were about to pop out of her skull.

"I got carried away and did something unnecessary," Boxxy continued. "So, sorry about that."

The Mimic was hardly being sincere, of course. The time it had spent with its demon familiars had twisted its perceptions, giving it the impression that unsolicited sexual advances were not socially unacceptable behavior. However, it had spoken at length with Snack during the night regarding step three of Operation TASTYCOCK, and been informed that it was, in fact, gravely mistaken. The succubus had also taught it that one of the key things it had to learn in order to blend in with civilised society was how to apologise.

Or, more specifically, how to lie when apologising.

Fizzy, however, picked up on its insincerity almost immediately. She knew the monster would never truly repent for anything it had done. But even if it hadn't meant it, the fact that the Mimic understood that it had done something unacceptable and cared enough to at least attempt an

apology made her feel a tiny bit better. It wasn't nearly enough to erase what had happened, but it was a start.

"Thank you… for saying that…" she said meekly.

Apparently satisfied, the Mimic flashed a goofy smile on its Snack-shaped 'face' before reverting to its base form and waiting for Nasty to return. It had learned quite a bit about Necromancy from her during their trip. It had to know the lich's strengths and weaknesses if it wanted to utilise her correctly, and so it had questioned her extensively regarding her abilities.

For starters, it would appear that Necromancy, much like Cadaver Absorption, used Corpse-targeted magic. Both the heart and the brain needed to be present for the body to be considered viable, and extensive damage to the body would reduce the strength of the summoned undead. This meant that the Mimic would have to share its corpses with the Necromancer, though that probably wouldn't be much of an issue. Boxxy's daily body count alone was enough to make a mortician dizzy.

Another interesting detail was that undead raised with Necromancy differed significantly to those that appeared due to the Blight. The latter most commonly were mindless zombies, barely more than the reanimated remains of whatever creature they had been. They were entirely feral, lacking the mental capacity to use most of the Skills they'd had while alive despite having access to them. Such undead had only their rotting bodies to rely on, which the Blight apparently compensated for by greatly boosting their physical attributes. Even then, the zombies' strength and speed depended entirely on the quality of the corpse from which it had been raised. Valeria could control the undead drones easily enough with her Lord of the Dead Skill, but she disliked using them as they were little more than cannon fodder.

The undead created through Necromancy were called Hollowed or Hollows, as they were essentially constructs forged from mana with no free will whatsoever. Calling them 'flesh golems' would not have been entirely wrong, as the corpses used for their creation were nothing more than raw materials. The body's skin, bone and muscle had been warped, twisted and reconfigured into a completely different form. The quality of the corpse was still important, but a huge chunk of a Hollow's strength was determined by the Skills and Attributes of its creator.

However, it would appear that there was a limit to the number of minions a Necromancer could actually control at any given time. Unlike a Warlock's familiars, there was no immortal soul keeping the conjured flesh intact and active. A substitute was necessary, hence why each Hollow reserved a portion of their creator's MP as upkeep, temporarily reducing their overall available amount. The exact quantity depended on the strength and species of the raised dead, and the occupied capacity would be restored once the minion was defeated or dismissed.

The type of undead created through Necromancy depended on both Skill Level and the caster's choice. Skeletons were the most versatile, as they could be brought forth as soldiers, archers, or even casters. They could also be mass-produced thanks to their low cost, but were extremely fragile. Spectres could be called upon to serve as scouts or to terrorise the living, their intangible forms making them difficult to eliminate without magic. Ghouls were an advanced zombie-type minion most commonly used as shock troops. Their speed, durability, and disease-spreading abilities made them well-suited to quickly overwhelming an enemy, although their uncontrollable screeching made them unusable for any tactic requiring subtlety.

The highest class of undead fighters a Necromancer could produce were the tough and tenacious Death Knights and the headless powerhouses known as Dullahans. Both were well versed in martial combat, fighting with skill and precision in addition to their unholy might. Their weapons and armour were transient items manifested from the Necromancy Skill, meaning that their MP upkeep was significantly higher than that of lesser undead.

Boxxy had concluded that Necromancy was a Skill that demanded a certain amount of tactical thinking and foresight. Choosing the right configuration of one's undead entourage and commanding them properly were vital to the caster's success. The latter was particularly challenging, as Hollows were completely incapable of making decisions for themselves. A sudden change in situation would leave them unable to adapt in the same way that a Warlock's familiars or a Monster Tamer's pets could, so success or failure would depend almost entirely on their master's ability to direct troops in combat.

Which was what Valeria appeared to be struggling with. She may have been a lich with powerful Skills and Spells, but she was still inexperienced

when it came to matters of strategy and tactics. Back in the tower, she had showed herself right at the start of the battle, confronting the invader directly for no reason other than to satisfy her own ego. Boxxy considered this a foolish approach, to say the least. Had their positions been reversed, the Mimic would have sent wave after wave of undead to tire out its opponent before they had ever met face-to-chest, if it even showed itself at all.

Granted, it was no expert on mixed troop tactics either, but it had still learned quite a bit from all the fights it had taken part in. Whether it was engaging a party of adventurers, fighting alongside its familiars or swooping in to gobble up both sides of an ongoing battle, it had steadily managed to accumulate a wealth of combat experience and had thus been able to give Valeria a few pointers. Which, judging from the undead she brought when she rejoined the others, she had taken entirely to heart. Hardly surprising, considering her bizarre infatuation with the Mimic, or – more specifically – with its sexual prowess.

So, rather than fill up her Necromancy capacity with nothing but Death Knights like she had done before her reunion with Boxxy, she had diversified her undead. She still had ten of the Knights, but they were only intended to serve as the vanguard. She'd also created six plate-armoured Dullahans wielding huge, double-handed war-hammers, and eight Skeletal Mages for long-range magical support.

This platoon of twenty-two undead was her limit for the moment, but that would gradually increase so long as she kept raising her INT Attribute. Her troops' fighting strength was equivalent to human adventurers of about Level 25 or 30 for the skeletons, and up to about Level 40 for the more elite warriors.

Boxxy was entirely satisfied with the size of its army, since, frankly speaking, they were only intended to help penetrate the dungeon's outer defenses. It would be an issue if the place had had nothing but golems in it, as it would be impossible for Valeria to replenish their numbers. Another quirk of the undead was that they couldn't recover their HP in areas without Blight. Even though this bunch wouldn't tire out no matter how long they fought, wear and tear were a very real concern as every sustained injury would be effectively permanent. Even Valeria wasn't exactly exempt from this, although her nature as a lich made it more of a nuisance than a concern.

After confirming that everyone was ready, the party – twenty-three undead, two demons, one Mimic and a gnome – commenced their assault on the Spire of the Jade King.

Their first hurdle was navigating the hedge maze, which was resolved by having Xera fly overhead and guide the ground-based troops towards the Spire. Valeria tried to do the same, but her body was conjured partially through earth magic, so she couldn't float more than half a metre above the ground without assistance.

The invading party also attempted the obvious solution of tearing their way straight through the green walls in the direction of the Spire, but that proved impossible. No matter how often the vibrant hedges were crushed, slashed, or burned away, they always grew back mere moments later. At least there was plenty of room to fight since the corridors were at least five metres wide, sometimes even six or seven. Boxxy's group was able to form a solid front line with just six Death Knights and one extremely enthusiastic fiend, making it impossible for the stone soldiers to surround or flank them.

Their formation was put to the test almost immediately, as less than a minute after entering the maze they encountered the first of the resident guardians. It was a mobile statue of an extremely muscular, naked man with a stone helmet framing its handsome visage, just as Boxxy's preliminary scouting had revealed. The Mimic, however, had neglected to mention that the things were as tall as fiends at more than two-and-a-half metres, and their massive stone shields and spears were even more intimidating than Fizzy had imagined.

"Arms, kill it," Boxxy commanded.

"Alright!" the fiend cheered, smashing her fists together. "This is gonna be fun!"

Kora strolled up to the golem, and it immediately put its rectangular, door-like shield between them while keeping its stone spear trained on her. Kora assumed a fighting stance and rushed the creature, sidestepping the spear aimed at her midsection to swing her metal-clad fists at the thick shield.

"Ora! Ora ora ora ora ora!"

The golem withstood the shower of punches without sustaining much damage, but its shield couldn't last long under the assault and was soon covered in cracks as the stone began to crumble away. It took a long hop backwards, its bare heels scraping along the smooth stone path of the maze.

Kora rushed the golem again, but this time was unable to fully avoid its spear. It managed to gouge out part of her shoulder, but the fiend ignored the relatively minor wound and resumed her assault, smashing the shield to pieces before her opponent could back away. With its primary defense compromised, the golem was thrown off balance, forcing it to stagger backwards. Kora seized the opportunity, drawing back one of her right arms to deliver an absolutely massive punch.

"Uppercut!"

She let out a shout while swinging her fist in a flawless upward motion to smash directly into the underside of the statue's jaw. This was no regular punch, however, as it flew with a speed and ferocity that her literally idiocy-powered muscles were incapable of producing on their own and flashed with a dull red light at the moment of impact. The force behind the blow was enough to knock the stone soldier – which must have weighed at least seven hundred kilos – straight off its feet, its back striking the ground with a heavy thud.

The fiend immediately closed in on her fallen foe, raising her foot high above the golem's chest.

"War Stomp!"

Her armoured boot smashed down onto the prone stone soldier like a miniature comet, leaving behind a trail of more red light.

THUUM

An earsplitting noise almost like an explosion echoed through the area, the impact sending dust and rocks flying in every direction. The golem had broken into several large chunks as Kora's foot crashed straight through it, covering the stone floor in a spiderweb of cracks. The fiend lifted her boot from the demolished golem's remains and smiled fiercely.

"How's that?!"

"Later tonight…" Xera mumbled, her imagination already running wild.

"P-p-please don't use that near me! I'll die for sure!" Fizzy pleaded, her own imagination running in a completely different direction.

Valeria was too busy staring longingly at Boxxy to give a flying fuck about Kora, a sentiment the fiend readily returned. The two of them had formed a silent pact of mutual indifference, and both sides were adamant about upholding it. They may have worked for the same boss, but that didn't mean they had to like each other, or even bother to communicate more than the bare minimum.

“That’s almost shiny!”

Speaking of said boss, the Mimic was apparently impressed by the demonstration. To think, both of those tasty-looking attacks had come from a single Skill, courtesy of Kora’s Berserker Job.

[Face Smasher]

There’s an art to everything and punching things in the face is no exception.
Requirements: Level 15 Martial Job, Level 4 Brawling Mastery, STR 100
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Grants knowledge of a new Brawling Martial Art at each Level of this Skill. Increases the effectiveness of punches and kicks by 2% per Level of this Skill.

Although Boxxy was aware of the existence of Martial Arts – or just ‘Arts,’ for short – this was the first time it had been able to witness them firsthand. In essence, if Caster Jobs like Pyromancers or Warlocks had Spells, then Martial Jobs like Berserkers and Warriors had Arts. They both consumed MP to produce magical effects, although their methods of activation were very different. Whereas Spells necessitated the forging of a certain mental image, which was then realised through chanting, invoking a Martial Art required that the body be moved in a very specific manner.

For example, Uppercut on its own didn’t necessarily do a lot of damage, but it had greatly amplified knock-back force. War Stomp, on the other hand, was a technique that sent tremors through the ground and caused all grounded targets within five metres to stagger and lose their balance. The localised quake wouldn’t actually do any damage unless it was applied directly to the target’s body like Kora had done. The pile of rocks that had once been a golem could attest to just how deadly the shockwaves could be at point blank range.

Satisfied with the demonstration and making a mental note to find out how to obtain dagger-based Martial Arts at some point in the future, the Mimic ordered the rest of the group to advance. It wasn’t long before they began to run into groups of stone soldiers, rather than individuals. While a single golem was relatively easy to handle, fighting two or three at once was a completely different story, since their cooperation made them much harder to take down without suffering injury. The golems only became more

numerous the further into the maze the invaders progressed, with groups of seven at once becoming the norm by the time they were halfway through.

Thankfully, just as Boxxy had planned, their front line was able to seal the enemy off, allowing Xera, Valeria, and the skeleton mages to pepper the golems with a barrage of fire and ice-based magic. The resident monsters' large frames were actually somewhat beneficial to their formation, as it allowed these ranged attacks to soar over the undead knights' heads without any risk of hitting them. Boxxy also joined in on picking off the stone soldiers from a distance, though it mostly stuck to spraying jets of corrosive acid. The assault would have gone faster had the Mimic opted to use its highly destructive Ruin Spells, but it was here to Level its Mimic Job, not its Warlock Job.

Still, the monster-demon-undead coalition was able to make its way through the hedge maze without any significant difficulty. Even if the golems were good at absorbing physical damage, magical attacks were another story entirely. The barrage of fire, ice and acid brought them down easily, while Boxxy and Valeria's minions kept them at bay. Kora was able to rack up an impressive body count of her own thanks to Fizzy's healing and her master's occasional Dark Infusion, allowing her to fight as recklessly as she pleased.

The same could not be said of their undead vanguard, which had thinned considerably. Though the Death Knights only had to hold out for less than a minute before their opposition was reduced to dust, there was still a limit to how much punishment they could take. Boxxy had fully expected this to happen, which was why it had instructed Valeria to bring a good number of spares with her. The instant one undead warrior fell, another stepped up to take its place.

As a result, their undead host had been reduced to a single Death Knight, a pair of Dullahans, and four Skeletal Mages by the time the group made it through the hedge maze. They must have defeated at least eighty stone soldiers in the process, so the fact that any of the undead had survived at all was rather impressive. The rewards for fighting through so many of the golems were substantial as well, as the Mimic had reached Level 48, and Valeria was at Level 43, well on her way to Level 44. Fizzy had been unable to raise her Paladin Levels since her main role was supporting Kora, but at least her healing-related Skills had gained a decent amount of proficiency.

There had also been a certain amount of material gain from the expedition, as the group had encountered several stone-hewn treasure chests during their trek through the maze. These contained an assortment of random loot which the dungeon used to draw adventurers further inside, just like the wooden ones that Boxxy had imitated in its home dungeon. The greedy Mimic had naturally wanted to plunder each and every one it had come across. It even had Snack steer the group towards them despite having to take detours and walking into dead ends. Having to dispatch the golems guarding the chests had made the trip slightly more difficult than it needed to be, but the monster in charge was certain that its endeavour would pay off.

It was therefore quite miffed to find that the rewards were not worth the effort. Though the first two beautifully carved containers had yielded a sizeable pouch of gold coins and a case of healing potions, the next nine were far less encouraging. They held only common items like food, drink, clothing, and various works of art which, while high-quality goods, were of little to no use to Boxxy.

Fizzy, on the other hand, really wanted some of those things for herself, especially the appetising jars of honeyed apples and sturdy-looking apparel. She felt that the Mimic might have been willing to part with those since it clearly considered them to be un-shiny junk, but had been too afraid to ask. Though it was hard to read what an animate chest was thinking, its increasingly frequent hissing and growling made it obvious that it was growing more and more pissed off as time went on.

Once the group had reached the courtyard at the base of the Spire, Boxxy confirmed that there were no immediate dangers before assuming its Spell-casting form for the first time that day. The look on the pseudo-Xera's albino face made it immediately apparent that it was just as ticked off as the gnome had imagined it to be. However, if its seething glare was any indication, its mood hadn't been caused by some disappointing loot-boxes. At least, not entirely. No, the source of its ire was certainly not something, but *someone*.

Seeing this made Fizzy instinctively curl into a whimpering ball on the ground, even though the absolute obedience she had displayed today made her unlikely to be the cause of Boxxy's foul mood. Valeria could likewise be excluded since, while she had soaked up most of the XP, Boxxy understood that certain compromises were necessary in order to ensure a

safe hunt. The undead, as well, were entirely blameless, as it was impossible to force responsibility onto something that was not even self-aware. The only remaining suspects were the two familiars and the Mimic itself.

And, seeing as the wrathful box was a master at deflecting blame and Xera had done an excellent job of guiding it through the maze, this narrowed the list to one red-skinned moron.

"Shadowbolt!"

The mass of darkness flew from the staff in Boxxy's hands and hit Kora squarely in the back of the head, the impact nearly knocking her to the ground.

"Heeey!" she whined. "What gives, boss?"

"Your information was bad."

"No, it wasn't! I told you everything I found out while you were away last night, didn't I?"

"Then why did they become Enraged so often!?"

One reason so few of their undead had made it this far was that the stone soldiers had become Enraged many times, seemingly at random. When that happened, they would throw their spears at the back line and pull short, sharp swords from their own bodies. At that point they would abandon any attempt at defence and attack with much greater ferocity.

"I told you that would happen, though!" she complained. "It's not my fault those things got broken what with all the attacks flying around!"

"But if their spears were broken, then how were they able to throw them?" the Mimic countered.

The golems' sword slashes had certainly been dangerous, but nothing the front line couldn't handle. It was the spears that had been the real problem. The heavy stone projectiles were powerful enough to take out a skeleton mage in one hit, even managing to kill Snack on one occasion. That had brought down the group's ranged firepower, meaning that it had taken longer to defeat the soldiers. Which, in turn, meant that the front line had taken more damage.

One could argue that Boxxy's treasure-hunting detours were just as much to blame, but that wasn't how the box-in-charge saw things.

"Spears?" Kora raised an eyebrow. "What do spears have to do with anything?"

"Everything!"

Fizzy couldn't help but scream at the fiend, considering that one of those things had nearly taken her head clean off.

"You said th-th-that they 'get super pissed and start attacking like mad' if you break the shaft of their spears! B-b-but almost all of the ones that came flying at us were in pristine condition!"

"Very good, Fizzy," Boxxy commented, satisfied that its tiny protege had been paying attention. "So, Arms? Anything to say for yourself before the punishment starts?"

Kora closed her eyes, crossed two of her arms and scratched her nose with a third as she pondered the situation.

"Oh, wow!" she exclaimed after a while. "I guess I really should've worded that part better."

"Worded what part?"

"I wasn't talking about their *spears*."

And indeed, the trigger to the stone soldiers' Enraged state wasn't their weapon breaking. No, the golems had one more sizeable shaft on their bodies, one that no male in their right mind would want damaged.

"I was talking about their dicks."

Part Five

Boxxy was forced to re-summon Kora after it was done educating her on the importance of unambiguous reports. Admittedly, it could have forced her to fight even after it had pulled out all of her hair, stabbed her in the eyes with her own broken horns and torn off most of her limbs, but that would've been sub-optimal. Entertaining, but sub-optimal.

Once the freshly-scolded fiend was back in peak condition, the two of them joined the rest of the group, who had taken the opportunity to rest. Both Fizzy and Valeria had needed a break, as they were mentally exhausted from the constant fighting and needed to be in good condition before tackling the Spire itself. The courtyard appeared to be a sort of safe zone where monsters did not venture, so they had taken the chance to sharpen their focus a bit.

That said, the stone statues dotting the area were making them rather nervous, as there was no telling whether they might suddenly leap off their marble pedestals. Of course, it was also possible that said pedestals were part of the mechanism through which the dungeon created its golems, but if that was the case then they were quite inert, at least for the moment.

After making sure that everyone's HP and MP had fully recovered, Boxxy ushered the others towards the dungeon's titular spire. After seeing it up close, it really did appear to be sculpted from a single piece of black stone, its surface smooth and slightly reflective. However, the Mimic couldn't spot anything that looked like an entrance, at least not on the side visible from the group's current position. It circled the structure with Kora and the surviving high-class undead taking the lead but could find no way in even after doing two full laps around it.

"Nasty," it called, "go inside and look around."

"Whatever you say, honey!"

The lich merrily turned immaterial and attempted to fly through the solid surface. However, it would seem that the black stone was warded to prevent that sort of intrusion, as she slammed into it face-first, much to the amusement of the other girls. Fizzy and the two demons were apparently united in their disdain for Valeria, albeit for completely different reasons.

Xera saw her as an arrogant upstart unworthy of serving her beloved master. She thought the same of the gnome, of course, but at least the tiny woman knew her place, not to mention that she would serve as a good training partner for Boxxy's socialisation practice. That, and she could

really swing that wrench when properly provoked, so she wasn't completely hopeless.

Kora disliked the lich because of the roundabout and lazy way she fought her battles. From the fiend's point of view, it was the undead minions that did all the work while their mistress sat back and tossed out the occasional Spell. In actuality, even though she appeared to be idle, Valeria had her hands full commanding the mindless undead. A blockhead like Kora had no way of knowing such things, though. It also didn't help that the fiend was fully aware of how outmatched she would be if the two were to fight. While she was certainly capable of snapping Valeria like a twig, that would only matter if the lich allowed Kora to catch her. It was only natural that the demon would dislike something she was incapable of smashing.

As for Fizzy, she still put the blame for her traumatic experience squarely on Valeria's shoulders. She found herself constantly thinking about how much better off she'd have been if not for 'that dead slut.' Well, relatively speaking, at least. Plus, her newfound nature as a Paladin caused her to instinctively resent the undead, especially ones with such a high Level of Taboo. But no matter how much she wanted to get rid of the lich, she couldn't. Not only would she lose due to the sheer difference in power, but Boxxy refused to allow even a hint of infighting amongst its minions.

"Master, above!" Xera shouted suddenly.

The Mimic immediately turned its gaze upward to see a trio of shadows swooping down from the sky. It didn't have time to think, as one of them was coming down straight above it, so Boxxy dodged hurriedly to the side as the thing fell to the stone-tiled ground with a loud crash. The others hit with just as much force, the second squashing the last remaining Death Knight and the third landing directly on top of Valeria. Luckily, she was still under the intangibility effect of her Ethereal Body Skill, so she got off with merely a scare and a slightly bruised ego.

Not wasting any time, the Mimic leaped into the dust cloud the impact had kicked up and coiled itself around the closest of the intruders. Though it may have obstructed regular vision, the dust screen was no match for its magical perception abilities. It could see that the thing had wings, and thus would likely lift off unless it was stopped.

The intruders soon revealed themselves to be a trio of animated gargoyle statues, stone golems not too dissimilar from the soldiers in the

maze. They were similar in height and humanoid in shape, albeit with much thicker shoulders, torsos and arms, making them look more like gorillas than humans. Four solid, bat-like wings sprouted from each of their hunched backs, and their faces were carved into the likenesses of various beasts. The one that had aimed for Valeria had the face of a troll, while the one that had landed on the Death Knight looked like a snarling tiger. The gargoyle which Boxxy was coiling itself around bore the likeness of a wolf.

Much like the murderous box had assumed, the gargoyles attempted to rise into the air almost immediately. Their goal was most likely to stay out of harm's way while they positioned themselves for another attack. Boxxy wrapped a number of tentacles around its target's wings, but that didn't seem to stop or even slow the gargoyle as it flew into the sky, reaching an altitude of thirty or so metres in an instant. It would appear that the creatures didn't even need to flap the thin sheets of stone to gain altitude. However, the supernatural currents of air flowing from the appendages made it clear that they were not just there for decoration.

"Get everyone ready," it commanded telepathically, "I'm bringing them down!"

"Understood, Master!" Xera saluted.

Boxxy wasted no time applying Metal Mimicry to its tentacles, covering them in rows of sharp steel teeth and then moving them up and down the wings of the wolf-faced gargoyle like an improvised chainsaw. The freakish appendages tore ruthlessly through the larger monster's 'flesh,' grinding and chipping away at its rocky hide. Boxxy's attempts to cut off its wings flooded it with numerous damage notifications that were more distracting than it would've liked.

Its victim began to thrash about, rolling in mid-air in a desperate attempt to shake the Mimic off. It would appear that it had only just noticed it had a passenger, but by then it was far too late. The Mimic had firmly ensnared it and chewed through the base of its wings, snapping them off one after the other. The tiger-faced monster tried to aid its comrade as it flew past, attempting to punch the monster off the wolf-head's back. However, Boxxy countered by biting down on its stone fist with its steel-coated jaws, much to the would-be saviour's distress. The flying golem tried to pull its arm away, but the Mimic's powerful lid muscles refused to let go so easily.

Boxxy finished breaking through the third wing, which was finally enough to sabotage whatever Skill gave the gargoyle flight. It plummeted

towards the ground, threatening to drag both the Mimic and its own comrade along with it. Boxxy promptly released the crippled creature from its tentacled grasp and hurriedly coiled itself around the tiger-faced gargoyle, subjecting it to much the same treatment. It heard a heavy thud from below, most likely the one it hadn't yet touched repeating its dive-bomb attack. The sound was followed by a second, slightly softer impact as the mostly-wingless wolf-gargoyle slammed face-first into the ground.

After damaging the tiger-head's wings sufficiently and hitting it with a blast of corrosive acid for good measure, the Mimic finished gnawing its way through the gargoyle's arm and fell through the air. A pair of demonic wings sprang from its backside, allowing it to glide in the direction of its last target. The troll-headed statue appeared to have some sort of grudge against the undead, as it was currently positioning itself to attack one of the two remaining Dullahans.

However, it had finally noticed that its two brethren were no longer able to fly. Realising that something must have been responsible, it turned about in mid-air to spot a bizarre spider-legged, demon-winged chest gliding straight towards it. Rather than face the monster head on, it chose instead to increase its altitude even further, putting it well out of the Mimic's reach. It had deduced that the strange box was incapable of full flight, and likely assumed that avoiding it would be simple.

What it didn't see, however, was the Invisibility-clad succubus that had flown up to support her master.

"Fireball!"

FWOOM

Xera's Spell hit the last flying gargoyle dead-on, engulfing it completely in an explosion of flames. Her Devouring Flames clung to its craggy skin, but on the whole failed to do much damage. It seemed the flying golems were significantly more resistant to magic than the ground variants. The demonic Pyromancer was also unfortunately incapable of using ice, which was a golem's Bane. Not only would it do significantly more damage, but would also paralyse the constructs as it disrupted the flow of mana within their bodies. As much as Xera hated to admit it, Valeria was better suited to this type of opponent than she was.

That said, she certainly had no intention of backing down as she channelled her next Spell at the troll-faced statue charging towards her.

"Fireball!"

The Spell hit the gargoyle directly in the face, but it brushed it off easily and kept flying unperturbed, clearly intending to crush her into pulp with a swing of its massive fist. The succubus used Invisibility once more, effortlessly dodging once the monster had lost its target. She repositioned herself and launched another two Fireballs, setting the pace for the aerial cat-and-mouse game.

And Xera was *really* good at games.

While that was happening above, the rest of the team had their hands full fighting the two grounded gargoyles, with Kora and Fizzy teaming up to take on the wolf-headed one. The fiend had first engaged the living statue in a duel of fists, but things had rapidly devolved into the kind of chaotic brawl one would expect to see in a pub. There was no technique or logic to it, just two meatheads bashing each other over and over and over.

The pint-sized Paladin had initially thrown a couple of Holy Lights at the demon to keep her going, but the more Fizzy healed her wounds the less effective her Berserker Skills got. She judged that a far more effective means of offering support would be to create an opening for Kora to use her Martial Arts. While they didn't require chanting, the fiend couldn't just pull one off on a whim. She needed a few moments to prepare and then go through the necessary motions in order to properly activate one of those techniques.

The gnome surged forward between the two pairs of legs, doing her best to avoid being stepped on. Her eyes and weapon both glowed with yellow-green light as she triggered her Divine Wrath Skill and took an enormous, two-handed swing with her solid steel wrench. It initially appeared as though she were aiming at thin air, but then the gargoyle's leg moved directly into the path of her swing.

Fizzy was a Champion of Chaos. While certainly not as powerful as Bob himself, she was still able to subconsciously read between the lines and measure the variables to calculate the most likely outcome. This seemingly-complex Skill manifested itself in battle as a form of precognition, provided that she was focusing her attention on a single target. Ghostly outlines would dance in her vision, painting a picture that only she could see.

Although at first she'd thought she was going crazy, she had later realised that her enemies would often make the exact same movements as the 'ghosts' several moments after she had seen them. This was merely a prediction, however, and wasn't foolproof. There were times when multiple

possible outcomes branched out before her, and she had to make a snap decision as to which one to follow. But, after some practise and a lot of observation, the gnome had realised that the thickest, most clearly defined shadow was the one denoting the most likely outcome.

In this instance, she had seen that the gargoyle would be knocked just slightly off balance by an extra-heavy hit from Kora. It would wobble a bit and readjust its footing, bringing its leg right into the path of Fizzy's swing. The heavy tool smashed dead-on into its stone knee with a heavy crack, forcing the stone statue to stumble. Seeing her opportunity, Kora immediately moved forward. She stretched all four of her arms wide, then swung them inwards to smash the stumbling gargoyle's ill-fitting face.

"Head Crack!"

All four of her fists hit the wolf's head at once, two from each side. A deep crack spread across it, and a large portion of its head broke off completely to fall to the ground. Fizzy, who was still underfoot, delivered another heavy blow to its damaged knee, this time managing to break it completely in half. She had to roll out of the way to avoid being crushed by the stone statue as it tipped sideways and fell. It stretched out its left arm as if to catch itself, but the limb had already been badly damaged in the brawl. It snapped clean in two under its tremendous upper body weight, letting the golem crash to the ground.

"War Stomp!"

The fiend then put her boot down on its chest for good measure. It withstood the attack far better than the stone soldiers had, but the Art was still enough to break its torso into two large chunks, neither of which showed any signs of movement.

"Yeah!" Kora cheered, throwing her arms triumphantly into the air. "Get some!"

"Wuh- Watch it!" a voice squeaked from below. "Yo- you almost stomped me flat!"

"Oh right, you were there. Sorry squirt, but you're just way too tiny! Hahahaha!"

Fizzy sighed in exasperation. *One of these days…* she grumbled inwardly.

Looking around, she spotted that Boxxy, Valeria and the two remaining Dullahans had ganged up on the tiger-faced gargoyle. The hammer-wielding knights were doing an excellent job of keeping the stone creature busy.

They skillfully blocked or parried its attacks while counter-attacking at every opportunity. Unfortunately, they seemed to be doing very little actual damage. That was fine, though, as the Mimic appeared to be going full ham. It had transformed the tip of its tongue into a large steel ball with thick, short spikes jutting out of it and was swinging it around like some sort of flail.

As for Valeria, she was completely still, floating with her hands in front of her face as though she were gripping an invisible watermelon. Upon closer inspection, she appeared to be chanting something. After a few seconds, a strange ball of unnaturally bright blue smoke materialised between her palms.

"By the cursed ice, I command thee! Become brittle like glass and *shatter!*"

She finished her long chant with some ominous words while Boxxy and the two headless knights stepped quickly back. The blue smoke snaked forward as if it had a mind of its own, and, finding no other target, coiled itself around the living statue, seeping into its body and turning its stony skin from dull grey to a pale shade of blue. Boxxy charged as soon as the curse took hold, tongue-flail swinging. It hit the target squarely in the chest, causing the stone creature to explode into pebbles with a single blow.

The Curse of Shattering Valeria had just cast massively amplified the physical damage taken by those affected by it. While powerful, it unfortunately required a much longer chant than most Spells, which was a fairly common trait among invocations derived from the Hexcraft Skill. Plus, it was difficult to boost the effects of a curse through Skills other than Hexcraft or Taboo. Aiming them was exceptionally tricky as well, due to the way they moved erratically rather than a straight line. In fact, it could be said that curses had the nasty habit of disobeying their caster's wishes and latching onto a completely different target.

These drawbacks were the reason the lich hadn't dared use a curse against Boxxy during their confrontation. Even if she had managed to conjure a curse, the odds of hitting the agile mimic were practically nil. Yet despite the multitude of ways that a hex could misfire, be interrupted, or just plain fail, successfully landing one would inflict debilitating effects so powerful that the victim was as good as dead.

For instance, of the three other hexes Valeria had access to, the Curse of Silence would prevent the use of Martial Arts, Skills and Spells for up to

twenty seconds. Then there was the Curse of Fatigue, which rapidly drained stamina and dulled movement for about three minutes. Lastly – and arguably most horrifying – was the Curse of Solitude. It completely cut off all sensations such as sight or touch, leaving the target's mind trapped in a world of pure darkness and total silence for as long as thirty seconds. Though they retained full control of their body, they were completely unaware of what was happening around them. Or *to* them.

Needless to say, being hit with any one of these curses in the middle of a battle was nothing short of a death sentence. Despite the longer casting time and unreliable targeting, Hexcraft could be a source of immeasurable power to those that used it wisely – although such power came at a price.

Curses were a violation of the Taboo of Lunar, the goddess governing matters of wisdom, magic and learning. Her teachings dictated that curses and hexes were to be avoided, lest they pollute the world's ambient magic with their foul energy. The phenomenon could be plainly seen here, where mystical energy known as mana was thick in the air. The blue smog that permeated the smashed-up gargoyle's remains was slowly leaking out of them, staining both the air and the ground with the remnants of the curse.

Not that anyone present gave a damn about that sort of thing when they still had one more flying gargoyle to deal with. At least, until the troll-faced statue came crashing to the ground in a blaze of fire, picking itself up from the ground almost immediately after. While all of its wings and its health appeared to still be in good shape, it was no longer able to fly.

Though this was the first time Xera had fought these things, she knew full well that anything which defied the laws of physics by necessity used up MP as compensation. As she herself owned a pair of fully-functioning wings, she had realised almost immediately that her enemy's flight was clearly impossible without the help of a sustained Skill. She therefore had focused her attention on chipping away at her target's MP with her Devouring Flame and Mana Burn Skills.

[Devouring Flame]
Overwhelming fire leaves behind naught but ash and cinders.
Requirements: Level 5 Pyromancer, INT 40
Type: Toggled (ON)
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: None
Range: 100 meters

[Effects]
Increases the MP cost of Pyroclasm Spells by 20%.
Pyroclasm Spells will apply Devouring Flame to your target for 5 seconds.
Devouring Flame inflicts damage equal to 10% of the initial hit each second.
Increases the damage of Devouring Flame by 20% per Level of this Skill.

[Mana Burn]
A Pyromancer's flame can burn away magic itself.
Requirements: Level 10 Pyromancer, Devouring Flame, INT 45, WIS 45
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Devouring Flame effect will reduce the target's MP by an amount equal to 25% of its HP damage.
Increases the duration of Devouring Flame by 0.5 seconds per Level of this Skill.

While the gargoyle may have had tons of HP, the rule of thumb was that tough-yet-stupid monsters had a tiny MP pool in comparison, just like a certain horny fiend. All Xera had had to do was keep showering the statue with Fireballs until it was no longer able to sustain its magically-induced flight. And now that the creature had been thoroughly grounded, it found itself facing down four beings that were more than eager to shatter it to bits.

After finishing off the last gargoyle, Boxxy heard a loud crack and turned to see that a significant portion of the solid black stone that made up the Spire's exterior had crumbled away. A tall, oval-shaped hole had appeared in the side of the otherwise featureless tower, some fifteen metres from where their party was currently standing.

[The Area Guardians of the Emerald Maze have been slain.]

[To the victor go the spoils.]

[The Black Stairs can now be accessed freely for the next 24 hours.]

It would appear the gargoyles had been some kind of gatekeepers that had to be defeated in order to allow entry into the sealed tower. It would certainly explain why those three had been noticeably tougher than the other golems they'd faced so far, even if they had failed to defeat the invading group. It also made sense that the dungeon would use more powerful monsters to keep outsiders away from its deepest recesses.

However, Boxxy couldn't help but dwell on how baffling this arrangement was, as it failed to understand the backwards logic involved. What sort of idiot would design a door that opened once the guards were killed? Then again, this was probably just another quirk of the dungeon.

Come to think of it, it did remember encountering something regarding these so-called 'Area Guardians' once before. It was during the extremely brief period when it had obtained ownership of the Litigar Dungeon Complex's stolen core. One of the items in the list of unavailable functions it had seen just before it had realised the core was going into meltdown was labeled 'Guardian Allocation,' or something of the sort.

Thinking back, Boxxy also realised that it hadn't run across any such entities when it had raided its own birthplace. Then again, it also hadn't been able to repair any damage to its structure, or at least, not at the ridiculous rate that this place could. That, combined with the Spire of the Jade King's much thicker concentration of mana in the air, made one thing clear: This dungeon was far more advanced than the one from which Boxxy had been born.

The Mimic was beginning to question whether it was even worth it to enter the Spire itself since, if memory served, the dungeon likely also contained things like traps or puzzles. Was there even any point to dealing with such things? After all, it just needed Job Levels. Surely spending a few days fighting the stone soldiers out here in the courtyard would be enough to get it to Level 50, not to mention that the hedge maze also offered the occasional material reward. Thinking objectively, was there any real need to actually enter the place?

Boxxy glanced at the opening in question as its pragmatic mind considered its options. Suddenly, it spotted something just inside the tower's entrance. Momentarily doubting its single eye, it grew two more just to be sure, but there was no mistaking it. Just inside the newly-appeared stone archway was a single treasure chest. Another piece of incentive the dungeon had thrown at it in an effort to entice the creature into overcoming the Spire's challenges. Or luring it to its death, depending on the point of view.

However, this was no simple stone box, but an extravagant, lavishly decorated container that could be called a treasure in its own right. The sight stimulated Boxxy's greed unlike anything else it had encountered

since entering the dungeon. The Mimic threw caution to the wind and dashed towards its prize, completely ignoring its minions' protests.

The ornate treasure chest's lid flung itself open as the monster approached, almost as if it had recognised its rightful owner. There was a flash of light and a sinister-looking staff floated up from the container, then hovered lazily above it. The entirety of the staff had been molded from a midnight-black metal, including the highly detailed and undoubtedly demonic skull at its top. It had two pairs of eye sockets, one directly under the other, and each of them was fitted with a blood-red ruby that seemed to shine with an inner light. A pair of thick, ram-like horns jutted out from either side and the open, seemingly laughing jaw was filled with two sets of arrowhead-like teeth.

Five curved sheets of shining metal that resembled scythe blades held the macabre sculpture in place, giving the impression of a large creature preparing to crush the skull between its claws. The elaborate head was connected to a smooth, plain shaft that had a red spike-shaped gem attached to its other end. The item was almost two metres long top-to-bottom, which begged the question of how it had fit inside its container in the first place.

Or at least it would have, if Boxxy hadn't been too awestruck to even consider questioning the matter.

The spectacle before it was perhaps the shiniest thing it had ever seen in its relatively short life. It stared reverently, reaching warily toward it with a tongue tentacle. It hesitated for a moment, almost as if afraid to sully the precious thing with its touch. However, such thoughts were silly and puerile. This was clearly its reward, the dungeon's compensation for overcoming the three gargoyles, so the Mimic had the right to do with it as it wished. It slid its tongue over the cool metal surface, revelling in the sensation. Two more tongues shot out and coiled around it, shamelessly licking its prize all over.

The rest of the group had followed after seeing the Mimic run into the Spire. At first, they had tried to stop Boxxy doing anything rash, but had given up almost immediately. It was plainly obvious that the creature was lost in its own world, a place where none of their words or warnings could reach. At present, they could do nothing but stare, wide-eyed, as the monster slobbered all over the inanimate object.

"How enviable," Valeria commented, watching the spectacle with slightly glassy eyes. It was painfully obvious that all sorts of lewd fantasies

were coursing through her rotten head.

"Ugh," Kora grimaced in disgust. "I didn't think the boss would actually go and do that…"

"Well, I wouldn't say this was entirely unexpected," Xera pointed out.

"R-really? Th-then Boxxy has done something like this b-b-before?" Fizzy asked.

"No, not quite. I was sure that something like this was bound to happen eventually, though. I know my Master better than anyone, after all."

Her words were smug, but the lich they were indirectly aimed towards didn't even register their meaning. Kora's eyes went wide as she remembered something that had happened each time they had looted things from the dungeon.

"Wait, we can't bring that thing out of the dungeon, right? Shouldn't someone tell the boss?"

"N-not it!"

Fizzy immediately spoke up, having no desire to be beaten for being the bearer of bad news.

"Not it!"

Kora also didn't want to get eaten, so she echoed the gnome's words.

"I think we should just let Master enjoy itself while it can."

Xera, on the other hand, would have gladly participated in both of those activities, but she couldn't bring herself to interrupt her master's fun. After all, that wasn't what good servants did. Besides, it was highly likely that the Mimic would be distraught once it came back to reality and would seek comfort by devouring its favorite Snack.

For any dungeon chest, once opened, would soon crumble into nothing, even the intricately decorated, solid-gold chest that Boxxy was, for lack of a better word, fondling obscenely. As for the creepy-looking metal staff, that *was* actually a permanent item, and a powerful one at that.

Yet it had been brushed off to the side like some sort of unwanted consolation prize.

Part Six

Boxxy was understandably less than pleased when its beautiful golden chest disappeared into nothing after only a few minutes. However, much to Xera's disappointment, it wasn't sad or depressed enough to want to partake in Snack Time. The Mimic was instead flooded with unyielding rage. This bastard dungeon, how dare it mess with it like that? Did it have any idea who it was dealing with? This was Boxxy T. Morningwood, Rudolph-dammit, and it would not take this sort of abuse sitting down!

"Master, don't forget the staff."

It had been about to storm off with the intent of giving the dungeon a lesson it would never forget, but stopped in its tracks at the succubus' words.

"Staff? What staff?"

Xera sighed. As expected, her master hadn't even registered the item's existence. It had been so focused on the golden treasure chest that it had completely failed to notice the skull-headed metal staff hovering above it. Which was impressive, considering that it had knocked it out of the way in order to fully embrace its container.

The succubus stepped over to where the expensive-looking weapon had been left neglected on the ground. She bent over to pick it up, but the solid metal weapon was much heavier than it looked. She couldn't even budge it, no matter how much she strained her feeble arms and back.

Watching Snack's ongoing failure to do something as basic as lift an object from the ground steadily made Boxxy's anger diminish. It headed over to where she was kneeling, panting heavily from the exertion, and roughly pushed her to the side in order to see what all the fuss was about. Its pale imitation of Xera popped out of its mouth and grasped the item firmly.

Unlike the feeble demon, it was able to lift the object from the ground, though it still struggled somewhat. Whatever this black metal was, it was significantly heavier than steel or mithril.

"There was a staff?" Valeria blinked. "Huh, I didn't even notice!"

"Oh, yeah!" Kora exclaimed. "There was something like that, wasn't there?"

"Ah, now that you mention it…" Fizzy cupped her chin in thought.

Boxxy's borderline-obscene spectacle had apparently caused the others to momentarily forget about the actual treasure itself, making the exhausted

succubus lower her face into her palms.

It was official – she was surrounded by idiots. Then again, she was perhaps the biggest idiot of the lot for becoming infatuated with an animate chest. But she couldn't help herself. Nobody had ever truly understood her wants and needs quite like her current master. That was why she had wanted to present it with the clearly-valuable item in the first place, as satisfying the Mimic's greed was the only way to appeal to it. Well, that and entertaining its taste buds, but Xera already had *that* covered.

"Shadowbolt!"

Boxxy's sudden Spell hit Xera directly in her exposed stomach. There was a brief moment of realisation before a volatile mass of darkness ripped a fist-sized chunk from her body, sending bits of flesh flying everywhere.

[Your Spell has gouged out your target's insides. Target HP -287.]

The succubus clutched the hole in her stomach and curled up on the ground, her face twisted in something other than just pain.

Having confirmed the damage, the Mimic put the staff away and tried again.

"Shadowbolt!"

[Your Spell has gouged out your target's insides. Target HP -207.]

Quite the difference. It would appear that the fancy staff raised its offensive magical ability by about thirty percent, significantly higher than the seven percent with the plain staff that it had been using thus far. That wasn't all, however. The shiny skull-on-a-stick also boosted its INT by twenty-five points, and even appeared to slightly reduce the MP cost of its Spells. It was a significant upgrade, to say the least, although Boxxy couldn't be too happy about it. Not when it had more important things on its mind.

[Chaotic energies swirl around you. Your body has caught fire for 5 seconds.]

… Such as dealing with the after-effects of its Chaotic Disposition Skill.

Bright red flames enveloped Boxxy's faux-wood shell and ghostly white flesh, turning the Mimic into a walking bonfire.

"Honey?!" Valeria panicked. "Are you okay?!"

"I'm fine," it answered, its tone irritated.

"But you're on fire!"

"I'll get better."

[Your body has been burned by the flames. HP -98.]
[Your flesh has been mended. HP +160.]

It wasn't as bad as it looked since the magical flame was simply too weak to overpower the Mimic's regenerative powers. In fact, it actually helped a little, since it allowed Boxxy to gain some much-needed proficiency in Mend Flesh and Adaptive Defense without the risk of actual combat. Not enough to warrant the uncomfortable heat and the unpleasant sensation of its flesh searing, but it was something.

Thankfully, the brief delay between the notification popping up and the actual Skill going into effect had given Boxxy a chance to brace itself. Anticipating just when Chaotic Disposition would trigger itself was another story entirely, as it could pop up any time its MP was spent on Spells or Skills.

Boxxy knew all this because it had already set the Skill off at least ten times during their push through the hedge maze. The first time it had gone off, it had caused the Mimic's one eye to go completely blind, although the monster's magical perception hadn't been affected. The second had doubled the damage of its next Spell, while the third had caused it to float gently into the air, just like a certain lich.

The next time, the Skill had attempted to apply the Panic Spell to the golem Boxxy had been spraying with acid, but had failed to register any measurable effect. Other observed effects included a slightly toxic fog, granting double XP from the next monster killed, and shooting a random bolt of bright yellow energy that had punched a hole straight through Snack. Most bizarre by far, in Boxxy's opinion, was the Skill's claim that it had given its owner the ability to communicate with fish for five minutes.

Needless to say, it was far from reliable and the effects it produced were irritatingly unpredictable, but at least they were always temporary. Although there were some occasional tasty ones, the majority were either completely useless or downright harmful. The only consistent part of the Skill was that it appeared to have about a five percent chance of triggering whenever a Spell was cast or certain Skills were used. It seemed like only active abilities such as Acid Spray and Storage could set it off, while passives like Assassinate, Shapeshift and Metal Mimicry could not, despite the last of those also consuming MP.

The Mimic's ire over the disappearance of the golden treasure chest had dissipated almost entirely by the time the fire had extinguished itself.

Honestly, it really should have known better, considering that the stone boxes it had encountered earlier had done the exact same thing. It just hadn't cared for those or their disappointing contents, so it had completely put them out of its mind. It wasn't so easy to forget *that* one though, as the time spent with it, however short, had been truly special. Its sudden vanishing had left it with a vague sense of betrayal that completely dwarfed the time a certain gnome tried to sell it out.

That said, the fallacious object had presented it with a reason to venture deeper into the rest of the dungeon – the clear and confirmed possibility of obtaining powerful magic items.

Although the exact properties of such precious things were impossible to determine in the field, it was possible to ascertain at least some of their attributes through experimentation. Still, the only way to get the full picture of an item's bonuses and abilities was to go to a town or city and employ the services of a Scribe with the appropriate knowledge and Job Level. The combination of the Identify, Appraise Item and Detect Enchant Spells they had at their disposal was one of the things capable of fully revealing an object's physical and magical properties.

Having made up its mind, Boxxy stopped moping about, rallied its minions, and set off to conquer the rest of the dungeon.

Immediately inside the entrance was an open, flat space completely devoid of any furniture or decoration. Every surface appeared to have been carved from the same smooth black stone as the rest of the tower, even the enormous, spiralling staircase. The walls themselves were lined with a number of pale blue crystals that shone with a dim white light, providing some measure of visibility. The sparse illumination seemed to mess with one's spatial awareness, making it difficult to gauge the exact dimensions of the place. It wasn't hard to imagine one's confused depth perception leading to a nasty tumble down the stairs.

That said, it wasn't as though the group had much choice. As the circular staircase was the only route presented to them, they began climbing warily. The steps were uneven, gradually increasing in size as they ascended. After only a dozen steps they had become so large that an adult human would have needed to take two or three paces before reaching the next one. It was going to be a long, gradual climb to the top – not to mention a confusing one. The lack of any doors or windows made it nearly impossible to gauge how far they had actually come.

Knowing that an attack could come at any second, the group had adopted a loose battle formation. Kora and Boxxy were in the lead, with Fizzy following immediately after, silently thanking Jib for the break they had taken. It didn't matter how strong or fit one was, stairs were a universally exhausting chore, especially when they seemed to go on without end. Xera and Valeria were trailing several metres behind them, with the Dullahans – all that remained of their undead army – watching their backs.

Elevation aside, the place was still a relatively narrow corridor with precisely two directions from which potential attackers could appear, meaning that it would be nigh-impossible for anyone to sneak up on them. Unfortunately, it also provided the perfect opportunity to pincer a group of uninvited guests, which was precisely what Boxxy would have done had it been calling the shots around here.

Sure enough, their quiet climb was suddenly interrupted by the rapid approach of tiny glass feet scraping against the stones. Within seconds, countless crystalline beetles, each the size of a large dog, were pouring in from both ends of the stairs, skittering over the ground, walls and ceiling. The two Dullahans at the back turned at Valeria's command to swing their hammers at the incoming swarm, smashing five of the beetles to smithereens in an instant. It would appear that their translucent shells were just as fragile as they looked. Their sheer numbers, however, allowed them to easily overwhelm the two undead, toppling them with little difficulty.

"War Stomp!"

THUMP

Kora's Martial Art sent tremors through the surrounding stonework, causing the glassy insects around her to lose their grip on the walls and ceiling. She got busy, swinging her arms and legs enthusiastically as she pummelled them into dust. Boxxy and Fizzy rushed to assist her, which left Valeria and Xera to deal with the rear.

That, however, was hardly a problem.

"Inferno!"

FWOOSH

The succubus's Spell engulfed the corridor behind the group in fire. The sound of breaking glass could be heard within the swirling flames as the intense heat caused the beetles' crystalline bodies to crack. She probably could have held them off on her own, but Valeria evidently resented being upstaged and took matters into her own hands.

The lich inhaled deeply and unleashed her Sonic Scream. The earsplitting sound was amplified by the stone walls, echoing sharply throughout the entire Spire. The resulting screech was much stronger than the one she had let loose during the confrontation at the old Arcaneum tower, resulting in all of the crystal golems shattering at the intense vibrations.

However, the beetles weren't the only ones suffering. Fizzy clutched her head, nearly blacking out again, but Boxxy grabbed her before she collapsed and tossed her into its Storage. While the gnome normally disliked the dark, cramped space, under the circumstances she welcomed its deafening silence with open arms. As for Boxxy and its two demons, they were left to endure the horrible wail of the ex-banshee the old-fashioned way. Their formidable MNT Attribute scores allowed them to remain conscious, but their bodies still took a certain amount of damage.

The scream abated some fifteen seconds later, although the ringing in Xera and Kora's ears felt like it would last a week. The fiend had been about to rip her own ears off in desperation, but the screeching had thankfully stopped before she went through with it. Boxxy immediately spat Fizzy out, as it wasn't sure when the last time it had recycled the air inside its Storage had been. The gnome was a little disoriented, but otherwise fine.

[Chaotic energies swirl around you. You have obtained new headgear.]

Boxxy's brief use of Storage had caused its Chaotic Disposition to trigger once again. The 'new headgear' revealed itself to be a black, cylindrical top-hat, which materialised out of thin air and stuck itself to the top of the chest's lid. The Mimic grumbled inwardly, but couldn't complain too much. At least it wasn't something dangerous.

"Th-thanks, Boxxy," mumbled Fizzy, catching her breath.

She smiled slightly when she saw the monster's ridiculous new accessory, but refrained from breaking into outright laughter.

"Hah! Nice hat, boss! Khihihihi!"

Kora, on the other hand, giggled brazenly, though Boxxy failed to note the sarcasm.

"Think so?" it asked curiously.

"It is quite a classy one, Master," Xera stated calmly. "If hats could be shiny, then this one most definitely would be."

Boxxy had to agree with her. Even if it wasn't very practical, the top hat did seem to ooze a certain sense of fanciness.

As for Valeria, she was surveying the damage she'd caused with a shit-eating grin on her face. The splintered remains of countless beetles were strewn all around, slowly crumbling into dust as the dungeon reclaimed them. The lich gleefully turned around and opened her mouth to brag, but was met instead with a dagger through her throat.

"Keh! Kehok!" she coughed, visions of her first death flashing through her mind.

"Don't do unnecessary things!" Boxxy snarled, pulling the weapon from her neck.

While Valeria may have tried to claim otherwise, there really had been no reason for her to do that. The group had had the situation well in hand, and could have easily cleared the swarm even without her 'help.' Granted, there was no telling how long that would have taken since it was unclear exactly how many of the things there had been, but it couldn't possibly have been enough to overwhelm Boxxy. The creature's omindirectional sight and flexible tentacles meant that it didn't have any blind spots that could be exploited with such cheap tactics.

"I didn't let you live so that your stupidity could cause us more damage than the enemy!" it berated her. "You need to warn me next time you pull something like that, or it will be the last thing you neglect to do!"

"Koff! Koff! I'm so sorry, sweetie!" she coughed. "I'll be more mindful, please don't be mad!"

"… Alright. Since you understand, I'll let you off with just one stab wound for now."

"Thank you ever so much!"

The Mimic wasn't being sympathetic, nor was this some bizarre form of forgiveness – it was simple pragmatism. What was done was done, and she had ended up saving them a bit of time, so it wasn't as though her ill-advised actions were entirely without merit. However, even that small contribution would go to waste if Boxxy stopped to educate the lich on matters of friendly fire. It would do so eventually, of course, but now was neither the time nor the place.

The party continued their climb undisturbed, wary of a repeat attack that never came. Either the ambush from earlier had been the dungeon's only means of defence, or whoever was in charge here had decided a repeat would be futile.

Regardless, no other traps or enemies appeared to impede the group's progress, even once they had reached the top of the stairs. What blocked their way forward this time was a set of heavy double doors carved from even more shiny black marble. A series of intricate patterns was etched into the massive slabs, indicating that this was probably a place of some significance.

"Uhm, B-Boxxy?" Fizzy spoke up. "D-do you think we can take a reh-rest b-before we go… in… there?"

The gnome's already shaky voice grew smaller and smaller with every word she spoke. While the Mimic had said that it would be willing to take a break for her sake, this was the first time that she'd actually dared to ask for one. Though they had spent the better part of the day invading the dungeon, Boxxy had still made everyone take regular breaks to replenish their HP and MP even without her saying anything. The stupidly long climb, however, had drained what was left of her stamina.

"Okay," Boxxy said, much to Fizzy's relief. "Will half an hour be enough?"

"Y-yes! That'll be plenty!"

"Good. Arms, Snack – guard the stairs, make sure nothing sneaks up on us from behind."

"Understood, Master."

"You got it, boss!"

"Nasty."

"Yes, my darling!"

"You shut up and be quiet. I have preparations to make."

"Eh! But- But! Surely we can prepare by doing *that* a few times, right?!"

"I suggest you do as Master commands," Xera whispered. "Unless you've grown to like being stabbed in the neck."

"There's no such thing, you stupid slut! Not everyone's as hopelessly rotten as you!"

The succubus scoffed at the sheer irony in Valeria's words and stepped down to join Kora in keeping watch. The pouting lich seemed to calm down a bit and turned around to resume protesting, but was stunned into silence when she saw that Boxxy had assumed Xera's form and was sheathed in what appeared to be an aura of crackling lightning.

"Dark Explosion!"

The lich raised her hands and clenched her eyes shut in preparation for a blast that never came. After a few seconds, she peeked warily at the Mimic, realising that it was holding a twelve-sided, transparent object filled with ominous-looking energy. Her confusion was entirely natural, as this was her first time seeing Boxxy prepare a Big Bang Ball – a combination of Power Overwhelming, Crystallise Magic and Dark Explosion.

Boxxy deposited the solidified lump of mana into Storage and removed a metal toolbox that caught Fizzy's attention immediately. It was one of the bomb-making kits that she had sold to it about a month ago, before her life had gone to utter and complete shit. The Mimic opened the box and nonchalantly began putting together some rough hand grenades with whatever leftover materials it could find. After about five minutes its MP had fully recovered, so it stopped momentarily to make another Big Bang Ball before resuming its tinkering.

It was highly likely that there was something big on the other side of those doors, and the creature wanted to make sure that it was adequately prepared. It had refrained from using magic until now, since it had wanted to raise its Mimic Job Level, but that was not why it had climbed the Spire. It could have gotten all the XP it needed by fighting in the hedge maze outside, so there would be no need to hold back when it confronted whatever was behind that door.

Which was where Crystallise Magic would come in. The Skill was at Level 5, meaning that the Spell Crystals would last up to thirty minutes before disappearing. With a production rate of one Big Bang Ball every five minutes, the Mimic could walk through those doors with full MP and five or six of them at the ready. The Artificer-made explosives could technically be used to help finish the job in case the magic ones proved insufficient, although that wasn't the main reason Boxxy was making them. It had simply wanted to pass its idle time doing something productive and making bombs with the materials it had on hand had seemed like the best way to do it.

Unfortunately, it was short on explosive components, so it was only able to throw together six basic hand grenades and three satchel charges. It moved on to making music boxes with the copious amounts of cogs, gears and springs in its Storage, steadily raising the Level of both its Artificer Job and its Clockwork Expertise Skill.

Meanwhile, the two demons diligently carried out their orders, keeping an eye out for enemies while humping each other. When questioned, Kora simply stated that she didn't have eyes on her dick, so it was fine if it was buried in Xera's ass. Boxxy conceded the point and allowed them keep at it on the condition that they both remained vigilant.

Valeria watched the two go at it, her eyes wide. She'd had no idea that the tall, muscular demon had one of *those* hidden away. The revelation of the fiend's extra equipment had been quite a shock, though it had faded soon after. Pretty soon, she found herself growing excited as she watched them, even going so far as to caress herself between her legs. She threw a few longing glances over at Boxxy, but the Mimic did not even appear to register her existence. Not only was it entirely focused on its work, but it had already given Valeria her share of 'affirmative action' for the day. It had taken care of that on the way back from retrieving its dagger, which was why it had arrived a few hours later than it otherwise would have.

Fizzy also watched intently, though her gaze had been captivated by far less perverse matters.

So, this is how Boxxy gained Artificer Levels so rapidly, she remarked internally.

A veritable storm of screwdrivers, wrenches, tweezers, hammers and wire cutters was putting together clockwork contraptions before her very eyes. It wasn't just the sheer number of tool-tipped appendages. The mind-boggling speed and pinpoint precision with which they worked was absolutely fascinating to the gnome. The display was so fantastic, so utterly mesmerising that she could do little more than stare in openmouthed astonishment, not even registering all the lewd noises around her. She could scarcely believe that the brutish thing was capable of such delicate movements, but it made sense, considering the expertise with which they had flicked and teased her sensitive spots yesterday.

The realisation that she had just complimented her own rapist on its technique snapped the gnome out of her reverie. That was the one thing she could not forgive, the one thing that had truly hurt her in a way that was very different from the beatings. Or the kidnapping. Or the memory wiping. At least she could understand why the Mimic had done those things, but yesterday morning was completely unforgivable.

… Or was it?

Thinking back, Fizzy realised that her captor had never truly shown any real animosity towards her. It had been understandably upset with her at its capture, but it had since shifted the blame for that onto the gods' faith-measuring contest. None of the abuse had been because it hated her. In fact, it had become considerably kinder lately – if anything, it actually looked after her.

Didn't it?

But no, absolutely not, the rape yesterday could never be brushed aside so easily, no matter how hard she tried. It had completely crushed her, leaving the gnome utterly disgusted at the feeling of her own sullied body. She no longer even felt like a living being with thoughts and emotions, and had been silently contemplating suicide ever since it had happened.

It would be so… easy to do it. She had both the means and opportunity to escape her living nightmare, and the monstrous chest would be powerless to stop her.

But she would not, nay, *could* not do such a thing. Even if her mind wavered, her body remained firm. The biological drive to survive led her to sleep, eat and drink whenever possible. The unstoppable urge to cling onto her fragile existence with all her might was something the Mimic had thoroughly ingrained into her very being. The Mimic had demanded that she live, and if there was one thing the tortured woman could not deny, it was Boxxy's demands.

The thing was basically a natural disaster in the shape of a treasure chest. It would appear without warning and for no discernible reason, then proceed to do whatever it damn well pleased, caring nothing for anyone it hurt along the way. It didn't matter how much its victims tried to beg, plead or resist, they were powerless to stop it. From Fizzy's point of view, standing up to the thing was completely futile. Even if she were to survive the attempt, she'd be left homeless, destitute and drenched in various fluids, as if she'd challenged a typhoon.

… Almost exactly like that, actually.

Part Seven

Boxxy ordered its minions to get ready for combat. It had finished its preparations and was ready to face whatever awaited it on the other side of those doors. Kora and Xera stopped their antics and got in position, as did Valeria. Fizzy had braced herself as well, feeling strangely fired up. She just wanted to hit something, over and over again. Though she hadn't gotten to do all that much thus far, bashing those stone golems had turned out to be a surprisingly effective outlet for her pent-up anger. Probably not the healthiest method of therapy, but an effective one nonetheless.

The Mimic instructed Arms to open the heavy double doors and the eager fiend got to work immediately. She placed two hands on each door, really putting her back into it as she pushed them apart. Or at least, that was what she'd meant to do, but the large stone slabs opened practically on their own after her initial nudge. A large, circular chamber lay beyond, its walls, floor and ceiling made up of the same mystery stone as the rest of the Spire.

However, unlike the agonisingly long staircase, this room was far from featureless. Twenty evenly-spaced statues made from even more shiny black stone lined its walls. Though they were all based on the same aesthetic ideal as the soldiers outside, each of the constructs was uniquely outfitted with spears, shields, staves, bows, daggers, swords and axes in various configurations. One of them was even wielding a pitchfork as though it were an angry farmer. All were currently inanimate, but things were unlikely to stay that way, given the nature of the dungeon.

There was also the matter of the room's dimensions. It was easily thirty metres in diameter, which was considerably wider than the tower it supposedly occupied. A chamber so large would undoubtedly be visible from the ground, giving the Spire a mushroom shape, but that clearly hadn't been the case. Its actual location was also suspect, as Boxxy seriously doubted whether this was indeed the top floor. They had definitely climbed at least ninety metres worth of stairs by its estimate, despite the fact that the tower couldn't possibly be taller than fifty.

In short, this room's very existence made no sense, yet here it was.

And the thing most likely responsible for the creation of the impossible space was in this very room. A crystal sphere, roughly a metre wide, floated just under the center of the circular ceiling. It glowed with bright blue light, lighting up the entire room like a miniature sun. The radiant glow pulsed slowly, releasing waves of mana that washed over the group with every

‘heartbeat’ of the magical sphere. Those waves were so heavy with magic that magically enhanced perception wasn’t even necessary to sense them radiating outwards, especially at this short distance.

This was without a doubt the magic core responsible for maintaining the Spire of the Jade King, and directly underneath it, sitting on a heavy-looking throne, was the dungeon’s namesake. The Jade King was bright green, his slightly transparent body shaped like an elderly, bearded man wearing a crown on his head. He was also depicted as wearing clothes and armour, unlike the twenty naked ‘servants’ around him. The statue’s eyelids opened slowly as he awakened, his shimmering, crystalline eyes regarding the five intruders into his royal chamber as he lifted his intricately-detailed body from its seat.

He drew the beautiful sword sheathed at his left, pointing the heavy blade directly at Boxxy and its group. His arrogant posture and grand movements exuded a regal demeanour truly befitting of a mighty ruler. The black statues lining the walls moved in unison, kneeling before their sovereign as if this was some sort of elaborate stage play. The invaders prepared to repel an attack at the sudden movement, but the golems showed no further signs of life.

“Who. Dares?”

A deep, groaning voice echoed throughout the chamber, making it difficult to tell exactly which direction the sound was coming from. One would assume that this was the Jade King’s voice, but that was debatable seeing as his lips hadn’t moved.

“Intruders. In. My. Realm?” he continued. “I. Shall. Show. Thee-”

Clunk

The Jade King’s speech was rudely interrupted as a small, glassy object struck him square in the forehead. It bounced harmlessly off his shiny skin and fell, prompting the three-metre-tall golem to catch it in his free hand almost by reflex. A very poor decision, given the nature of the magic sealed inside the crystal.

KADOOON

[Your target has sustained massive injury. Target HP -760.]

The force of the blast shook the entire room, sending green shards flying in every direction. Boxxy didn’t even wait for the dust to settle before throwing the rest of the Big Bang Balls it had prepared. Each released a deafening blast of destructive force as they tore through the Jade

King's body, dealing damage comparable to that of the first. Notifications informing the Mimic that its Crystallise Magic, Power Overwhelming and Ruin Mastery Skills had gone up to Levels 6, 7 and 9, respectively, flashed through its mind. It was about to move onto the Artificer-made explosives before it suddenly stopped, tentacles on the pins, as it realised that there was nothing left to explode.

[The final guardian of the Spire of the Jade King has been slain.]

[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Rare Golem Dismantler – Jade.]

[To the victor go the spoils.]

[The dungeon's monsters will become more docile for the next 48 hours.]

Xera, Kora, Fizzy and Valeria could do little but gape in stunned silence at the cloud of dust that had once been the dungeon's final boss, their jaws hanging wide open. The only thing left of the Jade King once the air had cleared was a collection of jagged green pebbles scattered all over the floor. The series of blasts, totaling over three and a half thousand points of damage, had been so violent that a number of them had even embedded themselves in the far wall. The four women could scarcely believe their eyes, but the dungeon-wide all-clear message was definite proof that yes, it was already over.

"Well," Boxxy finally broke the silence. "That was easy!"

"That's an understatement," Xera mumbled.

The literal King of the place had been defeated so quickly, he hadn't even gotten a chance to finish his speech, let alone order his Obsidian Retainers to assist him. The statues remained in their kneeling positions, even after their king had been reduced to debris right in front of them. Bits of him were actually lodged in some of their bodies, but even that wasn't enough to spur them to action without orders.

"Wow! Darling is sooo strong!" Valeria cooed. "You should celebrate by ravaging me until dawn!"

Such outbursts were by now commonplace, so the rest of the group ignored her and left her to her delusions. She was literally the only one who still refused to accept that the Mimic considered such matters a necessary chore, not a pleasure.

"I guess Boxxy didn't need all those other bombs, huh?"

Though Fizzy said that, part of her had expected something like this. After all, the Mimic had just dumped half an hour's worth of its MP onto

the Jade King. The gnome may not have been all that well-versed in matters of the arcane, but it was hard to imagine that anything could come away unscathed after being blasted with so much energy.

"Aw, man! And I was just about to really cut loose," Kora complained. "It was the perfect chance to take my Berserker Rage for a spin!"

[Berserker Rage]

A Berserker's unyielding rage is both a blessing and a curse.
Requirements: Level 20 Berserker, STR 100, END 100
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 0 MP
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases the effectiveness of the STR Attribute by 20% per Level of this Skill for 1 minute.
Reduces physical damage taken by 50% for 1 minute.
Reduces all damage caused by 50% for 15 minutes once the initial effects of this Skill expire.
Increases physical damage taken by 25% for 15 minutes once the initial effects of this Skill expire.
This Skill may not be activated more than once every 12 hours.

Her master had forbidden her from using the Skill in question whenever she pleased. While the boost in combat prowess was fantastic, it came with several significant drawbacks. Boxxy had made an exception and given her permission to activate it only if the fight had demanded it. Which clearly hadn't been the case, as what had just transpired couldn't even be considered an actual fight.

Honestly speaking, though, Boxxy couldn't take all the credit for this victory. The Jade King's untimely demise had been almost entirely his own fault. Had he been more quick-witted, he could have dodged those Spell Crystals easily. Sure, he'd looked tough, and likely had a good deal of resistance to magic, but his behavior had been so moronic that it was almost as though he'd been *asking* to be obliterated. Not only had he given the intruders a chance to prepare before facing him, but he'd begun monologuing instead of fighting them. Was he an idiot? Had he paid no attention to his opponents at all? He was probably an idiot, right? Why hadn't he attempted a surprise attack, like the gargoyles?

After carefully considering the evidence, Boxxy confidently concluded that the Jade King was, in fact, an idiot. Once that had been established, the Mimic put the matter out of its relatively tiny mind and approached the center of the room. The golden chest containing its prize was already waiting for it, having popped out of the floor just next to the Idiot King's throne. Boxxy wasn't aware of when or even how it had gotten there, but questioning every weird thing that happened in a dungeon was a waste of time and energy.

The gilded treasure chest flung itself open when Boxxy approached, exactly like the previous one had. The Mimic mustered every bit of its willpower in an attempt to hold itself back from worshiping the sublimely radiant form. It succeeded, barely, and kept itself firmly in check as it beheld the item that had risen from the chest and was currently floating in mid-air.

It was a piece of steel plate armour – a left-handed gauntlet, to be exact. The sleek, polished metal was rather shiny in its own right, though it obviously could not compare to the glorious container underneath. The bulky metal glove would protect the wearer's entire forearm from fingertip to elbow, in addition to the sturdy-looking shield permanently affixed to its outer side. Which was good, since this made the shield much more difficult to disarm, but also bad because of the way it seemed to restrict the movements of the hand and wrist.

The usability of the item was practically zero to a creature with no hands, but there was a good chance that it was enchanted gear, which would mean it was fairly expensive. Having already decided to pawn the gauntlet off for profit at the first possible opportunity, Boxxy gingerly reached to grab hold of it with a tongue-tentacle.

"HRSSSHTHTHTH!"

Boxxy had nearly touched it when the creature hissed sharply, its outstretched appendage recoiling in disgust and its owner took a few hurried steps back.

"Master? What's wrong?" Xera asked worriedly.

"The item is nasty!" it growled in response.

"Huh? Something wrong with the gauntlet?"

The succubus approached the object in question to examine it up close. She was no expert on armour, but she did know a thing or two about magic, and the object practically reeked of it. Her master was significantly more

sensitive to ambient mana than she was, so it was hardly a surprise that it had been disturbed by the vile energy the thing exuded. The Mimic had noticed that there was clearly something very wrong with the metal glove, but it likely had no idea what that 'something' was.

"Master, I believe this item is cursed," Xera declared

Those words put Boxxy in a foul mood, as they meant that it had gone through all that trouble for tainted goods. Cursed items were something that it had heard about from a merchant in Erosa, before its cover had been blown wide open. They differed from regular magic items in two major ways. Firstly, while their enchantments were far more powerful, they also carried with them negative, sometimes debilitating effects. Both the good and the bad would often correlate with each other in some twisted or ironic way, like a cursed ring that allowed its wielder to become invisible but also robbed them of their eyesight.

Then there was the second, more worrying aspect of cursed items. More often than not they would permanently bond with their user in addition to any negative side effects. Armour and jewellry would fuse to the wearer's skin and bones while weapons would come to life and turn on their wielder if they went unused for too long. There were only two ways to rid oneself of cursed equipment: amputate whatever body part the object was attached to, or have a skilled Enchanter purify the item. Neither was preferable, as the former could leave one crippled for life while the latter would result in the destruction of the profane object, or at least greatly diminish its power.

There were, of course, those that were willing to bear a curse in exchange for terrible power, but nutjobs like that were in the minority.

"Cursed, you say?" Valeria called. "Let me take a look!"

The lich floated over to the treasure chest, grabbing the item brazenly. She flipped it around in her hands, although it took a bit of effort. The thing was heavier than it looked.

"Yup, cursed for sure," she said after a few seconds. "This is a pretty strong one too, based on what I know from Hexcraft… Huh? Why are you all looking at me like that?"

She had just noticed the demons and the gnome cringing at her, and the lich's face went stiff as realisation finally dawned. She looked down at the Mimic just in time to see an extra-thick tentacle hurtling toward her face.

SMACK

The blow sent her flying into the ceiling, forcing her to drop the magic gauntlet, which fell to the ground with a loud clang.

"Don't touch what's mine!" Boxxy growled.

Valeria had laid her hands on the Mimic's property without asking permission. Just because the item was cursed and the monster had no intention of even touching it certainly did *not* mean that it wasn't planning to keep it.

"She's so lucky. I should have grabbed it first," Xera lamented.

"Nice swing, boss!" Kora cheered, clearly enjoying Valeria's misfortune.

"She r-really should know b-b-b-better by now," Fizzy muttered.

The Mimic managed to calm itself down somewhat once punishment had been administered. At the very least, it had learned that simply touching the thing wasn't going to trigger the curse, so it could safely order the succubus to pick it up. Just because it was *safe* to touch didn't mean that it *wanted* to. Xera did as instructed, helping Boxxy to stow the gauntlet inside its Storage. It would deal with the cursed thing later. In the meantime, there was still the matter of the dungeon core suspended beneath the ceiling.

Of course Boxxy wanted to take it, why wouldn't it? If nothing else, grabbing this thing would allow it to power up through the Grand Theft Arcana Perk. Speaking of which, the victory message earlier had said something about a new achievement, hadn't it? The Mimic had been so preoccupied with the phantasmal treasure chest that it had almost forgotten about it.

"Perk List!"

[Perk List]

Arcane Assassin
Monster Magic
Grand Theft Arcana
Butcher of Humanity
Collateral Damage
Hero of Chaos
Rare Golem Dismantler – Jade

After calling up the relevant screen, it focused its mind on the latest entry.

[Rare Golem Dismantler – Jade]

Some people just have a knack for breaking things.

Requirements: Clear the dungeon known as the Spire of the Jade King.
[Effects]
Increases XP gained from defeating golems by 5%.

Well, this was interesting. The wording seemed to imply that there were other Rare Golem Dismantler Perks. Calling that deduction tasty, however, wouldn't exactly be accurate since Boxxy had no intention whatsoever of looking for any more of those rare golems. In fact, it could barely stand the thought of going through all the effort of killing something it couldn't even eat. That said, it wasn't as though the Perk was completely useless. The Mimic was planning to keep killing the golems around the Spire until it reached Level 50 Mimic, and that five percent bonus would help it reach its goal sooner rather than later.

But what of the others?

"Fizzy, did you get a new Perk?" it asked suddenly.

"Eh?! Ah! Y-yes! I did! Perk List," she chanted. "… Ruh-Rare Golem Dismantler, right?"

Meaning that it was safe to assume that the entire group had been credited for clearing the dungeon, even though Boxxy had done all the work – at least at the end. Even so, Fizzy and Nasty would have been the only ones to get the bonus since contracted familiars were incapable of gaining Perks. It only suspected that the lich had gotten it, as she was still dazed from Boxxy punting her into the ceiling and didn't seem to be in any condition to discuss her Status. The important thing was that the gnome, the Mimic and the lich would most likely all be able to benefit from Grand Theft Arcana.

Which was a good thing, as it meant a greater overall increase in their group's combat ability.

"Arms, go shake the shiny ball loose."

"Sure thing, boss!"

The fiend walked briskly towards the edge of the room. Once she reached the wall, she took a running start and leapt into the air, spinning around to deliver a high-impact flying dropkick to the dungeon core.

WHAM

[Your attack has been repelled.]

However, dislodging it was much easier said than done. As with the Litigar Dungeon Complex, the crystal sent the force of Kora's attack right back at her, the recoil sending her crashing to the ground. Valeria, who had

only just recovered from being lich-slapped, stared at the spectacle with wide eyes.

"Uhm, darling?" she asked, stiffly. "What- what is it you're trying to do?"

"I'm taking the shiny," came the monotone answer.

"What, the dungeon core?"

"Yes."

WHAM

"… You can *do* that?"

"Yeah, you can," Kora said, having just had another go at the core. "Last time was a lot of fun, you know!"

"Ahhh, Boxxy?!" Fizzy raised her voice. "Won't Charlie be mad if you take his dungeon core again?!"

She remembered that the God of Consequences had mentioned something along those lines during their last face-to-box-to-brick meeting.

"… Arms, hold on a minute."

That's right, pissing off Willie would be a phenomenally bad idea. The god may have been understanding the last time due to the Mimic's cataclysmic actions, but that was the past and this was the present.

"Master, that is a baseless worry," Xera shook her head. "I do not think this dungeon belongs to the Progenitor. It is much too… orderly."

"Oh, you do have a point there," Fizzy admitted. "I would think a dungeon owned by that guy would have all sorts of monsters in it and would probably be really hard to navigate. If a god does own this place, it's probably Goroth, not Pedro."

"What's a Goroth? Is it tasty?"

"Goroth is the God of the Earth," explained Fizzy. "He watches over artisans, craftsmen and artists. Actually, yeah, this dungeon is most probably Goroth's work. Legend says he created the first golems by giving life to the beautiful sculptures of his disciples, so what we've seen so far definitely fits."

"Hoo, you sure know a lot about him," Xera said suspiciously.

"W-well… he's highly regarded where I was born. There's no gnome or dwarf alive who doesn't revere him, you know. It's said he rewards those who work earnestly towards mastering their craft with his divine protection."

The gnome's expression turned dark as she stared into the distance.

“And yet the god I’ve been forced to serve is such a-”

“Watch your mouth, worm!”

Fizzy recoiled at Xera’s ice cold voice, bracing herself out of pure reflex. However, it would appear that this was not going to be a physical beatdown, but a verbal one.

“You should be thankful my Progenitor chose to give an insignificant bug like you some direction in life!”

WHAM

Kora continued to fling herself at the dungeon core as the succubus and the gnome faced off.

“D-direction?! That’s what you’re calling what he did to me?!” Fizzy protested.

“Of course! If it wasn’t for my master and the Progenitor, you would’ve spent the rest of your days in miserable solitude, clinging to the ghosts of the past! Knowing you, you’d probably *enjoy* such a sad, boring life!”

“What makes you think you know anything about me?!”

“I was inside your head! I’ve rooted around in there so much that by now I know you better than you know yourself!”

WHAM

“Well, what’s wrong with living a peaceful life?!” Fizzy argued.

“Hah! You call that living!? A boring, day-to-day routine where nothing changes? Fuck, even the lich over there is more alive than you were when we found you!”

“Hey! Don’t bring me into this!”

“SHUT IT!” they both shouted at Valeria.

WHAM

“I’ll have you know,” the succubus continued, “that our Progenitor did not act on a whim. He has some sort of plan in mind, because He is a wise and fair being. More so than any of those other so-called gods.”

“Fair? FAIR?! Forcing me to be his Champion for his own amusement is somehow ‘fair,’ is it?!”

“But it is,” Xera stated confidently. “It’s not like you haven’t benefitted from it, you know. Do you honestly think that you could have survived this long if you didn’t have the Paladin Job? You would have definitely died from the Blight, otherwise. And that’s assuming you would have even survived your first week in those monster-infested mountains.”

WHAM

"You-! … Okay, I admit you have a point there. But why did it have to be- No, he already answered that. Or rather, I answered it myself, didn't I?"

There was no reason it had needed to be her, specifically. She had just happened to be there.

"Wait," Fizzy mumbled. "What if it *wasn't* me? What if Boxxy had dragged someone else along?"

The succubus looked down at the gnome, smiling cockily.

"I believe you already know the answer to that, Champion of Chaos."

She did indeed. If someone else had been in Fizzy's place, then Lucius would have treated them in exactly the same way, regardless of who it was. Knowing him, he'd probably have made even a dumb critter like a rabbit or an alley cat into his Champion if the Mimic had brought one along. It was simply in his nature to do things that defied common sense, but seemed perfectly logical from his perspective.

Because the God of Unpredictability was neither cruel nor evil, nor was he particularly kind either. He simply was. The only reason Fizzy had a negative view of him was because of the terrible things that had been happening to her recently.

But the succubus was correct, the gnome owed her life to the deity. For better or worse, she had been made his Champion, and she was alive right now because of it. It hadn't been the random act of whimsy it had first appeared to be, either. She felt strangely confident that it was a calculated move that had served a very specific purpose.

In other words, for the first time in her life the pint-sized Paladin felt as though her existence had a meaning, a goal. So what if it was something inane like serving as entertainment to a bored god? At least she had a purpose and knew what it was, and that acknowledgment alone brought her troubled soul a much-needed measure of peace. It even gave her a strangely optimistic, hopeful feeling, one that suggested that maybe – just maybe – things might work out somehow.

"Yeah," she mumbled, after a long, hard think. "I guess this Paladin thing might not be so bad after all."

[Proficiency level increased. Champion of Chaos is now Level 7. FTH +2. LCK +2.]

WHAM

She turned her gaze away from the smugly smiling succubus and towards the resident muscle-brain, who had fallen on her ass once more.

“By the way, exactly why are you hitting that dungeon core over and over again?”

“‘Cause the boss said so,” Kora said, simply.

The Mimic had told Arms to resume her assault on the core, as their earlier conversation had determined that the dungeon did not belong to its benefactor. As for the lich, it seemed that she had nothing better to do than quietly fawn over Boxxy.

“But I thought we were trying to take it, not break it?” Fizzy argued.

“Nah, it’ll take a lot more than a few love taps to break one of these babies,” Kora explained, positioning herself for another run-up. “All I’m gonna do is knock it loose.”

“What, with brute force? I don’t mean to disrespect Boxxy’s, uh, wisdom, but I doubt violence is the answer here.”

“Of course it is,” the fiend declared. “I just haven’t used enough of it yet!”

She leapt upwards to deal one more flying kick to the shimmering orb. The last attempt did the trick, and the pale blue ball went flying into the wall of the room. The fiend landed on her feet, struck a triumphant multi-armed pose and smiled proudly at the dumbstruck gnome.

“See?! Works like a charm!”

“Charms are actually horribly unreliable, you know.”

Kora responded to Xera’s attempts to curb her enthusiasm by giving her the finger. Well, fingers, technically. Five of them, to be precise, all wrapped up nicely in a knuckle sandwich. As for Fizzy, she was left staring in stunned silence at the dislodged crystal core.

“… Well. That just happened,” she admitted after a few moments. “What now?”

“Now,” Boxxy butted in, “we roll it down the stairs and bring it outside the dungeon as fast as possible.”

“Is… Is there a reason why we need to rush?”

“Yes.”

The Paladin took a deep breath and prepared to ask the next question despite knowing full well that she would likely regret it.

“And what would that reason be?”

“It might explode and kill us if we don’t hurry.”

Fizzy had guessed right.

She did indeed regret her question.

Immensely.

Part Eight

The Mimic's party commenced their escape by pushing the dungeon core down the stairs and following after it. While it was true that Kora could have easily carried it, there didn't seem to be much point when gravity was more than happy to help out. It was also preferable to conserve stamina whenever possible. If past experiences were any indication, the group would most likely be attacked by a legion of golems once they made their way out of the Spire.

However, it soon became apparent that there was no reason to rush. The dungeon core had done nothing since Kora had knocked it from its magically-affixed spot, showing no signs of overloading or raising an alarm. Nor were there any demands that one of them become the new dungeon master. Did its presumably-divine owner honestly not care that their property was being stolen right out from under their proverbial nose? Or were they simply not spiteful enough to cause widespread destruction like Billy had?

Whatever the case, Boxxy certainly wasn't going to complain about the uneventful trip. Even the stone soldiers in the hedge maze left the group alone as they transported the core out of the dungeon. The grace period of reduced hostility meant that they no longer attacked on sight and only fought when provoked. If anything, they seemed to be actively avoiding Boxxy's group, though eight of them did have to be put down since they'd been in the way. That was ten times less than the number of golems they'd had to battle on the way in.

All things said and done, the return trip was very nearly restful. There was no mad dash for the exit, no hordes of monsters on their heels and no calamitous forces being thrown at them. Instead, their exit was more akin to a peaceful afternoon stroll through the park. It was also incredibly boring, which didn't sit particularly well with Kora since she hadn't quite had her fill of violence for the day. She'd been looking forward to smashing more golems, but even the few enemies they had encountered had been off limits since she was assigned to core-carrier duty. She was frustrated and irritated, which was really her own fault for getting her hopes up.

"The first dungeon run was a lot more fun," the fiend grumbled unhappily.

"S-So I take it the core won't suddenly explode and kill us, right?" Fizzy asked, glancing up at the glowing object.

“Don’t seem like it. It’s not getting bigger or flashing or anything, so I think we’re in the clear on that.”

“Oh, thank Bob,” the gnome exclaimed in relief. “I don’t think I can outrun a C-C-Calamity.”

“That’s a shame,” Valeria pouted. “All that death and destruction sounded incredibly romantic! I so wanted to witness my darling’s glorious fireworks firsthand!”

“Gonna witness my fist up your ass if you don’t knock that shit off already,” the fiend growled.

“R-really?! Nooo, don’t tempt me like that! I couldn’t bear to cheat on my darling Boxxy!”

“Uuuugh…”

They chatted back and forth as they made their leisurely way out of the hedge maze. They walked for a dozen or so metres until they had crossed the invisible border of the dungeon’s territory, causing a series of notifications to pop up.

[You have left the Spire of the Jade King.]

[Feat of strength performed! All Attributes +10.]

“Wuh- Grand Theft Arcana? Plus ten to all Attributes?! That’s insane!”

“My, what a wonderful gift! Thank you ever so much, darling!”

It would appear that Fizzy and Valeria had also gotten the Perk and the associated Attribute boost, just as Boxxy had anticipated. The Mimic checked on its familiars, but it didn’t seem as though either of them had received anything, which was also expected. Which wasn’t to say that they wouldn’t benefit from the theft. The sizable boost to Boxxy’s INT Attribute meant that it could pour more power into their conjured bodies upon their next summoning. It wasn’t as tasty as +10 across the board, but it was certainly better than nothing.

[You are now the owner of dungeon core PT-5484-BM.]

[All functions of dungeon core PT-5484-BM are currently unavailable.]

[Please establish a dungeon to unlock them.]

And there was the other set of notifications the Mimic had been waiting for, thankfully *without* the caveat that its newly-acquired core was going into meltdown. It seemed that either Willie had decided to allow Boxxy to run free with the crystal, or it belonged to someone who was less of a sore loser. Come to think of it, the dungeon core blowing up may have been the exception rather than the rule. It was entirely possible that Boxxy had been

mistaken, and their easy exit was actually typical of core heists. Though, technically speaking, anyone who would actively look for dungeon cores to steal was already well beyond the boundaries of what could be considered 'typical.'

But no matter. The important thing was that the monster was now in possession of its very own dungeon core.

"Uh, B-Boxxy?" stammered Fizzy. "What's going on with the Spire?!"

The Mimic turned its attention back towards the black tower. It had begun to sway back and forth, shaking violently as sizable pieces crumbled from its walls. A few seconds later, it collapsed in on itself like a house of cards. The large obsidian chunks hit the ground hard, kicking up huge clouds of dust and debris. It was no Calamity, but nonetheless it was quite the spectacle of destruction nonetheless.

"Huh," Kora grunted. "How come that thing suddenly fell over on its own?"

"Could be structural weakness or something? We did mess it up quite a bit on the way down."

Fizzy was referring to the multiple cracks and dents the dungeon core had made as it bounced haphazardly down the stairs. Which was quite odd considering that it wasn't nearly heavy enough to damage a material that solid. As odd as it seemed, it was almost as though the core was the Bane to its own dungeon. The Artificer part of her gnomish mind wanted to study the interaction more in-depth, but she assumed Boxxy would be wholly unwilling to delay their exit just to satisfy her curiosity.

Valeria, however, had a much less… scientific explanation.

"Isn't the Spire simply bowing down to my darling's greatness?"

"No, you airheaded fuckslut!"

The lich's inane prattle caused Xera to snap at her. As if something that stupid could possibly be the reason. At least Fizzy's theory made a certain amount of sense, even if it was wrong.

"It's because we took *that*," she pointed at the core. "The absence of its controlling unit destabilised the spatial distortion keeping the Spire in place, causing it to unravel and leading to a cascading failure as the enchanted medium broke apart under the strain of… You guys aren't getting any of this, are you?"

"Nope!" Kora answered proudly.

"The space was warped?" the lich frowned dumbly.

“S-sorry, Snack. I don’t really get that muh- magic stuff…” Fizzy mumbled in apology.

“Are mediums tasty?” Boxxy inquired curiously.

The succubus sighed in exasperation. She had momentarily forgotten she was, in fact, surrounded by idiots. This was why she normally suppressed the urge to show off her knowledge of magical theory. Granted, it wasn’t as though she had gone out of her way to study the intricacies of the arcane arts, but one tended to pick up a few things here and there after centuries of throwing mystic flames at people. As none of the others had her experience, she did her best to dumb it down, at least as much as possible.

“Look, it’s really simple. No core means no mana, no mana means no magic, and no magic means no magic tower.”

It was extremely patronising as far as gross oversimplification went, but it seemed to satisfy the others.

“So… are mediums tasty?”

All except one.

“… No, Master. Mediums are not particularly tasty.”

“Oh.”

Boxxy rapidly lost interest, instead turning its attention to its newest acquisition, which was still as inert as ever. If it wasn’t going to explode then the Mimic needed to discover how it could be used for its own benefit. Which was going to be a problem since it had no idea how to establish a dungeon, though it certainly wasn’t planning on doing that anytime soon. Settling down within *that man*’s territory just seemed like a terrible idea. On the bright side, getting started was as simple as chanting two words.

“Dungeon Management.”

[Dungeon Management]

[Core ID # PT-5484-BM]

Dormant

Owned by Boxxy T. Morningwood

92% Integrity

9,153/20,000 MP (-1.6/sec)

[Basic Functions]

Dungeon Expansion – Ready

Item Allocation – N/A

Mana Collection – N/A

Monster Spawner – N/A
Surveillance Net – N/A

[Advanced Features]

Guardian Assignment – N/A
Nexus Access – N/A
Prison Management – N/A
Terrain Sculpting – N/A
Trap Construction – N/A

A list of mostly-disabled functions and features filled its consciousness. Many were fairly obvious as to their purpose, while others were decidedly less so. As for the status of the core itself, it appeared to be… damaged? That was unexpected, but made sense in retrospect. The core had been within the blast radius of the Spell Crystals that had annihilated the Jade King, not to mention the rough manner with which the Mimic and its minions had been handling it. Anything would be busted up after so much abuse.

And yet, its Integrity had only been reduced by eight percent. Even if it wasn't as indestructible as Boxxy had initially assumed, it would obviously take some serious effort to actually break the thing. Which was a very good thing to know if Boxxy wished to repeat the feat.

However, the dungeon core was apparently also leaking mana, even though there were no visible cracks in its smooth surface. Whether this was due to damage or because Mana Collection was currently inactive was impossible to say, but at this rate all of its stored MP would be gone in a matter of hours. While Boxxy would have liked to keep the core's charge, it simply wasn't an option, so it dismissed the problem with a simple 'can't be helped' and left it alone for the moment.

It moved on to its next item of interest – the cursed shield-gauntlet. Now that they were safely outside the dungeon, the Mimic wanted to observe what effects the tainted piece of armour actually possessed. Not on *itself*, of course. While it wasn't certain, there was a good chance that, once equipped, the gauntlet would prove to be irremovable, potentially necessitating more drastic measures than it was willing to undergo. It was far more reasonable to force it on a disposable pawn, and, as luck would have it, Boxxy had access to two of those.

"Snack!"

"Yes, Master?"

The Mimic had been planning to have its pet succubus take the cursed glove for a test run, but paused when a sudden realisation struck.

"Can curses affect your soul?"

The preservation of its familiars' immortal souls was its sole responsibility as a Warlock. It had nearly failed once before with the Overlord incident, and it wanted to make absolutely sure that that sort of thing didn't happen again. Failure to do so could result in the termination of its contracts and/or life, outcomes that it naturally wished to avoid if at all possible.

"No, Master. A curse is incapable of such a thing, no matter how powerful it is."

"Are you sure?" Valeria asked doubtfully. "There are curses said to affect the mind and spirit, in addition to the body."

"Hah! Such trifling things have no effect on a demon. Our souls are much more powerful than a regular mortal's. Only magic that stems from the Beyond or the gods themselves can ever hope to truly harm us."

While this was mostly true, there was one exception in the form of weapons bearing the Demonbane curse. They were exceedingly rare, but for all intents and purposes they were also the only means by which a mortal could ever truly destroy a demon. Boxxy's Demonology Skill had reminded it of this, hence its sudden hesitation. Just because the gauntlet wasn't technically a weapon, it had no way of knowing whether other curses could have similar effects.

But apparently that was not the case here. Boxxy opened its Storage and spat the cursed object out, trying its best not to touch the disgusting thing.

"Snack, put this on."

"Understood, Master."

The succubus didn't even bat an eye as she knelt next to the fallen item. She was used to being the resident test subject, so she'd been expecting this to happen. If anything, she was looking forward to the sure-to-be deliciously torturous experience. Not to mention that the gauntlet had genuinely piqued her curiosity.

"Oof," she grunted, hefting it off the ground. "Really is heavier than it looks."

Xera turned it over in her arms, holding it shakily to slide her slender left hand into the much-too-large opening. The enchanted item must have detected the presence of a limb seeing as how it started changing size. The

steel plating let out a grinding noise as it shrunk to a tight fit, molding perfectly to the succubus's feminine forearm. Even the shield part was partially transformed, adopting a more elegant shape.

This was undoubtedly the result of the Well-Fitted enchantment, a somewhat generic feature included with most commercially available enchanted equipment. After all, no one would buy an expensive item that didn't fit right. The downside of this convenient effect was that there was a limit as to how much magic something could hold before breaking apart under the strain. Making room for Well-Fitted meant less capacity for other magical effects, thereby limiting the object's performance. The alternative was to order gear custom-fitted to the individual, then pay to have it enchanted according to their specifications. The resulting equipment would be significantly more useful than the generic stuff available on the market, but the process required a serious amount of time and money.

"Hey bubble-boobs, you feeling okay?"

The reason Kora had asked was because, though it had been several seconds since the gauntlet had tightened around Xera's arm, the succubus still had yet to react.

"Yeah, fine. I just expected this to go down differently."

"How's your arm?"

"It's fine, Master. It doesn't hurt or anything."

"Are you sure? It's turning all shiny."

Xera raised an eyebrow, glancing down at her gauntleted left arm. The Mimic's choice of words could occasionally be confusing, but she realised immediately that this time around it was being entirely literal. Her questioning look became a wide-eyed stare as she watched her blue skin flaking off in palm-sized, paper-thin sheets to reveal shiny metallic plates underneath. Her soft flesh was steadily being replaced by cold, hard steel, like an infection crawling its way up her arm. She was genuinely surprised to see that the transformation had already crept halfway up her bicep without her even noticing.

The others watched silently as the metamorphosis claimed the rest of her arm, beginning to spread across her torso at a significantly higher speed. It enveloped her breasts, collarbone and upper back in mere seconds. Her head, teeth, lips, even her hair and eyes all turned to solid steel in an instant. Her leathery bat-wings weren't spared, becoming a collection of steel sheets held together by metal rods. By the time her right arm and waist were fully

enveloped her legs finally buckled under all the extra weight. She fell to the ground with a dull thud, barely able to move as her hips, legs and ultimately feet became as solid as the rest of her.

[You have been afflicted by the Curse of the Steelshaper.]

"So, how is it?"

"Master, I- Ack!"

Xera was startled by the sound of her own voice. It sounded oddly tinny, as though she were speaking through a metal tube. Which, now that she thought about what state her throat was in, might have actually been the case.

"It… wasn't painful or anything," she continued, "but my body feels so heavy that I can barely even breathe."

Xera put her palms to the ground in an effort to push herself up, then froze, realising that she could feel neither the dirt under her palms nor the sunlight on her face. Though the thick armour that had replaced her flesh made her much harder to injure, it apparently also removed her sense of touch. And that wasn't the only sensation that was gone, as her nose could no longer pick up anything resembling a scent, not even the faint stench of rot that seemed to follow the lich everywhere. She hurriedly scooped up a bit of dirt and put it in her mouth, only to find that her taste buds were just as numb as the rest of her.

"Master!" she cried, through the mouthful of dirt. "I can't feel a single thing! It's like my body isn't really there!"

Although she'd become accustomed to sensory deprivation in the Beyond, this was much worse than that. It was like she was a prisoner in her own body, especially as it had become too heavy for her feeble muscles to move. It was a distressing state of affairs, and she might have seriously started to panic if she had also lost her hearing and eyesight.

"Really? Does this hurt?"

Boxxy moved closer to its newly-shiny familiar and struck her in the thigh with a tentacle coated in Metal Mimicry, making a small, gong-like sound in the process. The impact left a small dent in her new skin, but dealt precisely zero damage.

"N-no. That didn't hurt, Master," Xera's voice oozed with disappointment.

"What about this?"

It reformed the appendage into something resembling a spear and thrust it at the demon's steel midsection. Its second attempt was more forceful, allowing the tentacle to just barely pierce her torso. There was some slight damage and the Mimic could see a bit of demon blood oozing from the wound, but Xera remained unfazed.

"No, Master," she shook her head.

"So, you feel nothing at all?"

"I can tell… something is stuck in my body… but I can't discern its texture… nor its temperature. It is… difficult to put into words. I have never experienced such a feeling before…"

Xera was having more and more difficulty speaking as the steel's weight began to overwhelm her limited stamina.

"Is it a tasty feeling?"

"I… wouldn't say so, Master."

"Can you stand?"

"I don't know. I will try."

The succubus desperately attempted to push herself up from the ground. She struggled immensely, her arms and legs shaking furiously, but she somehow managed to get to her feet. Only to fall flat on her butt a second later.

"I can't do it," she panted frantically. "I don't have enough strength to – *huff* – handle this much – *huff* – weight. Even breathing – *huff* – and talking – *huff* – are exhausting."

Her rapid breathing grew shallower as her body was forced to expend more energy than it gained just trying to fill her lungs with air.

"I see. Okay, that's enough for now."

Boxxy dismissed the succubus, sending her back to the Beyond. Her metallic body took longer than it usually did to evaporate, but other than that it disappeared like it normally did. Left without an owner, the cursed gauntlet shook a few times before returning to its original dimensions with a loud snap. The Mimic then re-summoned its familiar, who materialised as her usual self with no apparent side effects aside from an unpleasant memory.

"Master, I do not believe we can sell that item. Like, at all."

"Why not? It makes you tougher and you don't feel pain, so it should be very tasty, right? Just need to be strong enough to handle the weight."

“Master, you need to consider the loss of touch, smell and taste. No person in their right mind would willingly give up those sensations.”

“Not even if they became super tough in return?”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

Xera was utterly confident of this. All living things – be they male or female, enlightened or monster, demon or mortal – lived to seek pleasure above all else, particularly the physical kind. Some might argue that this was a cynical outlook and that people were better than that, but Xera’s very existence gave testament to how naive and untrue that sentiment was. Even her master was like that, though its definition of ‘pleasure’ was a bit skewed.

“Would you ever use something that made it impossible to enjoy tasty things?”

“What?! Of course not!” Boxxy shouted angrily. “Why would I ever want such a vile thing?!”

“My point exactly, Master. I guarantee that there is no sane mortal out there who would give up a lifetime of tasty things for a pitiful, golem-like existence.”

“Golem-like, huh? I see, so it’s like that.”

Put that way, it made a weird kind of sense. The final reward for clearing a dungeon centered around golems was an item that turned the conqueror into one. Even the typically-dense Mimic was able to grasp that concept. It also understood exactly what Snack was getting at. After all, it also lost feeling with its limbs coated in Metal Mimicry, but generally didn’t consider it a big deal since it was handy during combat and it was a temporary thing. Imagining a situation where its entire body was permanently covered like that was extremely disturbing. Especially since that would also eliminate its sense of taste, which was one of the main things it derived pleasure from.

All things considered, Boxxy had to begrudgingly agree that nobody in their right mind would want the gauntlet. And if nobody wanted it, then the Mimic wouldn’t be able to get a good price for it, which meant that selling it would be a waste. And since it hated to waste things, cursed or not, it wanted to at least get *some* use out of it.

“Arms,” it called. “Try putting that gauntlet on.”

Its already-tough front-liner becoming even tougher could only be a good thing, and the fiend’s ridiculous strength and endurance would allow

her to turn the added weight into an advantage. It would not only be harder to knock her down, but all of her punches would grow more damaging if she put her heavy frame into them. Admittedly, she wouldn't be able to dodge all that well, but she probably wouldn't need to.

"Whatever you say, boss," Kora shrugged. "It'll take a lot of the fun out of fighting if I can't feel someone else's blood on my face, though."

She sauntered over to where the gauntlet lay on the ground and was about to bend over to pick it up when she realised that someone else had beaten her to it.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing, pipsqueak?"

Fizzy had picked up the gauntlet without anyone noticing and was staring at it intently. It was only when she felt the others' eyes upon her that she turned her eyes from the cursed item and towards the Mimic.

"Boxxy, do you insist on having Koralenteprix use this?"

The uncanny steadiness and determination in her voice genuinely surprised the creature. This was the first time since their escape that she had ever gazed unflinchingly at it like she did now. There was no stutter to her words, no meek subservience in her demeanour, and no fear in her eyes.

"… Why?" it asked.

"Because I want this."

Part Nine

Fizzy no longer wanted to feel. Such things had brought her nothing but misery ever since she had been imprisoned. It had only gotten worse ever since she'd been raped, to the point where she was sure that she would end her own life someday soon unless she did something about it.

But what could someone like her hope to accomplish?

Take revenge on Boxxy, the one who had abused and violated her? No, that would have been pointless. Like an avalanche, the Mimic had only acted the way it had because a certain someone had set it off. Blaming it would be like getting angry at the clouds for dropping rain on her picnic, to say nothing of the sheer impossibility of actually going against the creature. Plus, she honestly felt that she could start to get along with the monster now that it had started treating her better, if only it hadn't been for one damned thing.

Namely, her flesh. The stupid, disgusting, vile sack of meat that seemed determined to mess everything up. Not only was it an inconvenience to Boxxy, but she was continually assaulted by sensations she wanted no part of. The only reason her tortured mind kept drifting to thoughts of suicide was because that was the only way she could see to free herself from her damnable prison.

But now another answer had appeared, and she had seen its miraculous power with her own two eyes. A way to allow her to regain control over her sorry life. A method of re-forging herself into someone different, stronger. And she would take a page out of Boxxy's book and greedily latch onto the thing she desired. The thing she *needed*.

And it was that cold determination that had allowed her to stand up to the Mimic for what could very well have been the last time.

"Because I want this."

"You're not afraid of the curse?"

She took a deep breath. The fact that Boxxy was asking questions instead of denying her immediately meant that she had a chance. And if there was one thing that the God of Chaos dictated, it was that chances existed to be taken.

"Curse? This holds no curse, but my salvation!" the gnome declared. "I need this if I'm ever going to find a way to stop life from fucking me up the ass whenever it feels like it. No, I want more than that! I want to grab life by the balls, rip them off and ram them down its fucking throat!"

Fizzy panted heavily as she finished her outburst. She had surprised herself not only with how forceful her voice had been, but also by how natural it had felt. It was as though she had finally let loose a side of her that had been desperately clawing for a way out. The thought that speaking to her betters in such a manner could earn her a beating did not even occur to her.

Funnily enough, it apparently didn't occur to Boxxy, either.

"Heh. Hehehehe. Hahahahahahaha!"

What came from the Mimic's throat was not abuse, orders or derision, but a menacing laugh.

"SHAAAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH! SHAAAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH SHAH!"

Somewhere along the way it stopped laughing with the imitation Xera head it typically used to communicate, letting out a deep, guttural guffaw with its actual mouth. And yet the gnome remained unwavering in her determination.

"That's it!" it exclaimed, once it had calmed down somewhat. "There's the monster I wanted to see! A thing that chases after what is tasty without holding back!"

That was indeed it. This right here was exactly what it had been talking about when it had told the gnome that it would teach her to fight like a monster, but she hadn't been able to reach that point until now. No matter how much it had pushed her, no matter how much it had abused her, the strangely stubborn creature called Cornie Fizzlesprocket had refused to let go of her gnomish sensibilities. Boxxy had been able to see it in her body language, in every little movement she made, that tiny bit of hesitation in her subconscious making her movements awkward and stiff. Forcing her to fight so many monsters to the death had helped mitigate it somewhat, but she'd still been lacking, still incomplete.

But the current Fizzy had none of those flaws. She stood firmly, unwilling to simply give up and let go of her goals, showing no hesitation whatsoever in the face of the objectively more powerful being that she was addressing. Her body was in a completely relaxed and natural state, ready to spring into action the instant its owner ordered. It was as if she had already prepared herself to fight to the death for the gauntlet, should Boxxy deny her. Perhaps the cursed item was the last thing she'd needed to let go of that dreadfully civilised part of her.

There was just one small thing that the Mimic needed to clarify.

"Okay, you want my shiny glove. What will you give me in return?"

Everything in the world could have a price attached to it, even intangible things like 'salvation.' That was one of the valuable life lessons that it had learned during its time with the Mercenary Guild. Another such nugget of wisdom was that there was much profit to be gained from the misery and desperation of others. That said, Boxxy seriously doubted whether Fizzy actually had anything to offer. The greedy Mimic had taken everything from her but her life, and even that was only a murderous whim away. It had already decided that it would give her the gauntlet regardless of her answer, but thought it might as well demand some sort of compensation. After all, that was yet another lesson that the old bartender in Erosa had taught the 'illustrious Mister Morningwood:'

Asking was free.

"I offer you my complete loyalty and total obedience," the gnome answered resolutely. "It is the only thing I have left to give."

Now there was something Boxxy hadn't considered. While it was true that Fizzy behaved herself and obeyed its orders, that was only because of the fear that Boxxy had put into her. Something that it had already determined to be a sub-optimal means of control, but the only one it had had at its disposal. After all, Fizzy wasn't a demon to be bound to a contract, nor was she a lich that could be kept in line by threatening her phylactery. There was no actual way to ensure that she would obey Boxxy unconditionally, yet she still offered her 'complete loyalty' and 'total obedience.'

And the Mimic was quite curious to see how she planned to hold up her end of the bargain.

"Okay, let's say I accept. How will you give me such things?"

The tiny Paladin went down on one knee before Boxxy, gently placing the gauntlet on the ground next to her. She bowed deeply to the monster, lowering her head and body as far as her kneeling position would allow as her tiny fists pressed into the dirt.

"I, Cornie Fizzlesprocket, Champion of Chaos and Paladin of the Order of the Gilded Chest, hereby pledge myself into the service of Boxxy T. Morningwood, chosen Hero of the Goddess of Probability."

A soft yellow-green light poured from the gnome as she chanted.

“Your words shall be my law. Your wishes shall be my goals. Your choices shall be my creed.”

Countless motes of light began swirling around her, steadily coalescing into a small swarm.

“I vow to serve you completely in both body and soul, with my god as my witness. Let us teach the world the true meaning of chaos!”

FWOOM

The luminescent particles erupted into the sky, leaving behind a trail of golden light. They exploded with a series of sharp pops, releasing a shower of sparks that came together to spell out a message in the sky:

[I got you, fam!]

The entire group stared up at the glowing sign for a solid fifteen seconds before it faded away and Fizzy rose to her feet.

“What was that?” asked the flabbergasted Mimic.

“I just made the Pledge of Arms before the watchful eye of Salad, the God of Randomness. It’s a ceremony – a ritual I learned from the Holy Scripture Skill,” the gnome explained. “And it looks like the big guy not only heard me, but also supports it. That means I’ll be in line for some divine retribution if I betray or abandon you.”

She had decided that the first step towards regaining control of her life was to accept the things that she could not change. She was a Paladin aligned with the weirdest deity in existence and also Boxxy’s possession. This was her lot in life and trying to deny either of those things would be pointless. She had therefore decided to stop begrudgingly following the Mimic and begin actively supporting it. So what if it had raped her, hurt her, or abused her? She was confident that she could overcome such lingering resentments if she could just let go of her useless body.

Which led her to the second step in regaining control of her life – changing the things that she could. And what needed to change most was herself. Her selfish desire to abandon her worthless past and focus on her future had led her to this outcome. A combination of intent, circumstances and actions had conspired to make this one, singular moment in time a reality.

“Okay,” the Mimic said approvingly. “You can have the shiny glove.”

“Thanks, Boxxy!”

Fizzy smiled genuinely for the first time since her life had gone to shit. She was about to let go of that sorry existence once and for all, so it was

only natural that she'd be utterly overjoyed. Without further ado, she thrust her tiny arm into the cursed gauntlet, which groaned and screeched as it shrunk down to an even smaller size than it had before. Matching Fizzy's small build should have been well beyond the capabilities of the transformative enchantment it bore, yet something seemed to be driving it to push beyond its limits.

It wrapped itself snugly around her hand and forearm, forming a perfect fit. The curse activated in the next instant, spreading rapidly over the gnome's body – much faster than it had with Xera. Unlike the succubus, who had instinctively fought against the intrusion, Fizzy welcomed the affliction with open arms. It overtook her entire being within moments, but at the same time it also did so much more. It enveloped her. It embraced her. It freed her.

It *became* her.

[You have been afflicted by the Curse of the Steelshaper.]

[Your willingness to embrace the curse has amplified its effect.]

Something stirred deep within Fizzy. A horrifying gurgle came from her torso, but lasted only a brief moment before transitioning into a drawn-out, metallic groan, like steel scraping against steel. Though nobody knew what was going on – least of all the gnome herself – she took it all with a blissful smile, even though it hurt so much that it felt as though her organs were being stretched inside out. But it would soon be over. These few moments of agony were nothing more than the last, desperate cries her pathetic flesh would make before it was silenced forever.

And then, finally, it ended.

[Your species has become Metal Golem (Steel).]

[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Divine Beast.]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 1 Metal Golem! STR +3. END +3. AGI +2. FTH +1.]

[Proficiency level increased. Metallopathy is now Level 1. INT +2. WIS +2.]

When Fizzy next opened her eyes, she no longer felt cold, hungry or tired. She could feel neither the shoes on her feet nor the wind in her hair, which had become a decorative lump of metal. The former gnome shuddered delightedly at the lack of sensation. Though it had fought to the bitter end, her sinful flesh had nevertheless finally been cast away, like a gangrenous limb that needed to be amputated. A defect to be ironed out.

Or at least, that was how it should have been. No bothersome sensations to plague her troubled mind, that had been the goal… So then-

"How?"

Her tone had become several octaves deeper. She spoke with a heavy groan, as though her voice were being produced by two anvils grinding together. Disturbingly close to that, actually. One would think the newly-born golem would be surprised at the drastic change, but she had other, more important things to worry about.

"How come it itches?!" she screamed.

Fizzy clawed at her chest furiously, desperate to get rid of the incredibly bothersome sensation she no longer wanted. Her metal fingers grasped the chainmail shirt that had protected her body and ripped it apart as though it were made of paper. She clawed at her metal skin, but stopped a few moments later when she realised that she no longer felt the urge to do so.

Having watched the transformation in total silence, Kora, Valeria and Xera decided to weigh in.

"Well, it's official. She's finally gone fucking nuts."

"Completely off her rocker."

"Indeed. Her tiny mind no longer clings to sanity."

Though seemingly full of pity at first, their voices suddenly turned joyful as they cheered her on.

"That's the spirit! Congrats on finally growing a pair, pipsqueak!" the fiend whooped, giving Fizzy a quadruple thumbs-up.

"Here, here," Xera chimed in smugly. "You've become a fine monster. I knew Master had made the right decision in sparing your life."

"One less rival…" Valeria mumbled to herself. "I mean, you've made a wise decision this day, I'm sure of it!"

The sudden influx of compliments, sincere or otherwise, calmed the panicking golem down somewhat. She steadied her breathing and once again allowed the nothingness to wash over her. A feeling of absolute peace and spiritual bliss welled up in her soul. This was it, this was just how she'd imagined it. This new, unfeeling body wasn't a prison – it was her sanctuary, her fortress. She realised with a sick sense of delight that she no longer needed to breathe, either. The only reason her small chest continued to move up and down was simply out of habit. That, and she still needed air to pass through her new voice box in order to speak.

“Uhm, Boxxy,” she spoke up. “Do you still have that ‘junk’ we picked up this morning?”

The Mimic snapped out of its inner thoughts, turning its attention back to its newly-refurbished servant.

“I do. Why?”

“Would you bring them out, please?”

The Mimic opened its maw and three large wooden crates emerged, landing on the ground between it and the golem with a series of soft thuds. These were Boxxy’s ‘bargain bins’ – containers filled to the brim with miscellaneous items that Boxxy had little to no use for, random stuff it had collected as time went on. It wasn’t as though it had a reason to hang onto all the borderline useless junk, but there was nothing to be gained by throwing it out, either. Other than Storage space, that was, but at present it had plenty of that left.

It was therefore unsurprising that the random un-shiny loot that the dungeon had given it was all here, which was precisely what Fizzy was after as she started rummaging through the mess. She briefly regretted that she’d never be able to taste that honeyed fruit she’d had her eye on, but found comfort in the knowledge that she’d never have to taste her own blood or mucus, either. Besides, preserved food wasn’t what she was after.

Her goal was the various clothing items that the dungeon had given Boxxy, much to its dismay. While part of her recognised that, as a golem, she no longer needed such silly things, she simply didn’t feel right without them. The sense of decency she had cultivated over the past two decades demanded that she cover her breasts, at the very least. It would also probably be a good idea to change the filthy underwear covering her naughty bits.

Wait, did she even still have naughty bits? Upon closer examination Fizzy confirmed that yes, yes she did. Come to think of it, the other golems she’d seen today had all been anatomically accurate, so it made sense that her genitals would still be there, even if they were no longer functional. The same went for her nipples, though the breasts they were attached to were quite different. They were rounder, perkier and noticeably bigger than they had been a few minutes ago. While she hadn’t exactly minded her old ones, just looking down at these new puppies filled her with confidence. Her hips, thighs and butt had also plumped up, making her much more attractive

overall. It was the sort of sexy body that, in her honest opinion, deserved to be shown off.

With that in mind, she resumed her search for clothes to accentuate her new curves. She couldn't get too crazy, though, as one of Boxxy's goals was to infiltrate society without anyone realising that it was a monster. If Fizzy was to support the Mimic fully, then she had to blend in with the civilised world as best she could, which meant that clothing was an absolute must. That said, there really wasn't much to work with in the pile of odds and ends, so she would have to get a bit creative.

She found a plain beige tunic that looked as though it would be a perfect fit. That usually meant that it had been made with a human child in mind, but Fizzy was beyond caring about such things. The plain garment was a promising start, but her rigid pigtails and the shield permanently attached to her left arm made it impossible to put on without ripping it to shreds. Deciding that she could make it work anyway, she reached for an old pair of scissors with the intent of making some alterations.

And then she felt it again – an itch. Not on her skin, exactly, but in the tool she was now holding. Letting go made the sensation go away, only for it to come back immediately once she put her hands on them again. It was an odd feeling, to say the least, and after staring intently at the scissors for a few moments she finally understood the cause – they were rusty. Not extremely so, just a few spots here and there along the edges, but that was without a doubt the cause of the uncomfortable sensation.

Thinking back on her chainmail, she realised that she had worn it for nearly a month straight with no maintenance whatsoever. Muck, water and blood had splashed it regularly, so it was only natural that it would be covered in rust. Looking through the bargain bin's contents, Fizzy spotted a heavily corroded pipe of some sort and grabbed hold of it with her other hand. Sure enough, the rusty parts started itching immediately – or at least, that was how her brain interpreted the bizarre tingle.

There was more to it than that, though. The longer she held onto the piece of junk, the more it began to feel like a part of her. Focusing her attention on it, she discovered that she could accurately gauge just how deep the corrosion had spread. Not only that, but she felt like she could determine the metal from which the thing had been made just by holding it.

It was iron, as expected, but inlaid with a thin coat of silver.

[Proficiency level increased. Metallopathy is now Level 2. INT +2. WIS +2.]

TONK

Fizzy slapped her forehead as the realisation struck. Of course – her transformation into a metal golem came with a new Job, a new Skill, *and* a new Perk! She really should have confirmed what those did before getting sidetracked. Well, better than late than never!

[Metallopathy]

All golems share a unique link with compatible materials.

Requirements: Metal Golem variant

Type: Passive

Range: Touch

[Effects]

Allows the exchange of sensory data with any metal object through skin contact.

Increases the variety and amount of sensory input that can be processed with every Level of this Skill.

So that's what this was. The sensations were the 'feelings' of the metal rod in her hand. Actually, wouldn't this be extremely useful to an Artificer like her? Wait, hold on! Would she even be capable of handling that Job anymore? That aspect of her life was something that had completely slipped her mind. Fizzy let go of the objects she was holding and carefully inspected her open-palmed hands and fingers. And the longer she stared, the more hopeful she felt.

No matter how good an Artificer was, no matter how much DEX or experience they had, it was an inevitable fact of life that their hands would shake ever so slightly. It was intrinsic to all living beings. The act of breathing and the pulsing of the heart both meant that a living body could never be completely still. Those tiny involuntary movements were one of the main causes of defects in an artisan or artist's work, the one thing that made perfection so agonisingly hard to achieve.

Unless one happened to be a golem. Fizzy's limbs may have been heavier than ever, but they were completely and utterly still. Even statues would be jealous if they saw how magnificently her polished digits remained in place without moving a single millimetre out of position. Emboldened by her newfound advantage, Fizzy wiggled her fingers and wrists around in the motions that she had performed thousands if not tens of

thousands of times before. The movements had been so deeply ingrained into her throughout her life as an Artificer that she could have done them in her sleep.

Unfortunately, her new hands were too bulky and clumsy. She was unused to the new strength and weight of her limbs, and her joints felt stiff and unresponsive. Not by much, but enough to potentially ruin an electrical circuit or trigger wire. She didn't lose heart though, if she even still had one of those. After all, those stone soldiers had looked every bit as clumsy as she did, but they'd moved with a grace one would never expect from a living statue. And stone was inferior to steel, so there would surely be some Skill or another that could give her the sort of precise motor control she needed. Combined with her new stability and this Metallopathy thing, this could pave the way towards her becoming the greatest Artificer alive. Perhaps even the greatest Artificer who had ever lived. That ever *would* live!

Fizzy tightened her fists with newfound determination. The 'curse' had given her so much more than she could ever have dreamed. It was well beyond a blessing in disguise at this point. Speaking of blessings, there was also the matter of the Perk that she'd gained.

[Divine Beast]

A title formally given to creatures that have sworn themselves in service to the gods.

Requirements: Become a Paladin, Priest or Monk as a non-enlightened species.

[Effects]

Gain an additional +1 FTH every time a Monster Job increases in Level.

So, she was a Divine Beast of Chaos, was she? She liked the sound of that. The order of acquisition was a bit out of whack, but she couldn't really care about that. All that mattered was that she had it, and it was a very good thing that she did. Even if it wasn't much, the Faith (FTH) she would gain from this trait would be of great use to a Paladin like her, especially if she were to ever go head-to-head against a certain undead whore. To put it in simpler terms, the Perk was quite tasty.

Having finished her introspection, Fizzy turned her attention back to the junk piles.

"Hey, Boxxy!" she called out. "I can use anything in this crate, right?!"

The Mimic was fairly certain that there was nothing of actual value in there, so if the gnome- Wait, was she even still one of those?

"Fizzy, are you still a gnome?"

"Not anymore!" she declared triumphantly. "I am now a full-bodied steel golem!"

"Ah, I see."

"So… I can have some of this stuff, or what?"

"Oh. Sure, I don't mind."

Frankly speaking, if Fizzy could make any use of that trash then she was welcome to it. Not to mention that she needed her own equipment if she was going to be a proper minion and not just an unwilling battle slave. Provided that it didn't cost too much, of course.

"Sweet! Thanks!"

The golem resumed her dumpster-diving with gusto, leaving Boxxy to try and piece together just what was going on. It would consult with Fizzy later to get the details on her new body, but right now it was far more concerned with something else. The Mimic had gotten a certain notification the instant the formerly-squishy thing had become significantly less squishy. A notification with some rather interesting implications.

[The flows of chaos have returned to their default, causal state.]

Based on the message, it would appear that the Agent of Chaos Skill had finally run its course. In other words, its effects had been active this whole time, ever since the gnome had been raped, which would indicate that that event had served as the trigger for this mind-boggling outcome. A curse transforming a gnome into a literal monster? Even Boxxy's warped common sense thought that that was perhaps a wee bit extreme. It now understood why Charlie had wanted a Hero. It was because the Agent of Chaos Skill would make the otherwise-impossible into a reality, or at least a possibility. Which was precisely the sort of thing that the God of Unfortunate Circumstances loved.

That said, there was no guarantee that the outcome of the divine ability would be beneficial to its holder. Boxxy's last conversation with Jeremy had made it abundantly clear that the bored deity cared only for unlikely events, regardless of what that actually meant for his Hero. Sure, this time around the Mimic had gained a more capable minion, but there was no telling what would happen next time. Unpredictable as it was, Agent of

Chaos could potentially result in a catastrophic chain of events that would reduce its wielder to a smoldering corpse.

Or it could potentially shower it with so many tasty and shiny things that Boxxy wouldn't even be able to hold them all. It all hinged on factors entirely beyond the Mimic's perception or ability to control, which was how Walter seemed to define the concept of 'luck.' Which wasn't particularly reassuring, as far as Boxxy was concerned. If it had learned anything from the Chaotic Disposition Skill, it was that Lady Luck was a shameless slut that swung both ways, though perhaps not in so many words.

"All done!" Fizzy declared, posing before Boxxy in her new outfit.

The only thing that remained of the ex-gnome's former garments were her boots with the iron plates protecting the toes. She now wore a pair of baggy brown work pants that were a few sizes too big for her, so she'd wrapped a bandage-like cloth around her ankles to prevent them from flapping around too much. She'd secured them around her waist with an old belt, which rested low on her hips in a slightly askew manner that made it seem like it would slide right off if her new rear wasn't in the way. It also put into question whether she was wearing any underwear underneath, the answer to which would be a firm 'no.'

As if a golem needed such filthy things.

Her upper body was clad in that plain beige tunic, though she'd had to roughly cut away a lot of the garment's left side in order to make it fit over her rigid hair and unremovable shield. This left the entire area around her left shoulder, collarbone and armpit exposed, but it did the job of covering her breasts. Well, mostly at least. The fabric was also thick enough to mask the two points of her perky domes, at least so long as Fizzy didn't put any strain on it. It was also a bit on the short side, as it left the plating around her belly button quite visible.

The Fizzy of right now looked completely different to the one from half an hour ago. The shiny steel skin, metal hair and slightly provocative clothing were change enough, but her transformation went beyond simple appearance. The biggest difference was in her attitude. Her meek, subservient smile had become a wide, toothy grin, and the soft, frightened-rabbit look in her eyes had been permanently replaced by the manic glare she had shown only once or twice.

Though Boxxy certainly wasn't a 'people person,' it did know about monsters, and the gnome-shaped golem in front of it was without a doubt

one of them. Not a tortured creature desperately trying to stay alive in a harsh world, but a vicious predator that wouldn't hesitate to rip the throat out of anything or anyone that stood in its way. At least, that was the impression the new Fizzy left on Boxxy's instincts. The Mimic was honestly relieved that she had made her oath, as she certainly wasn't an opponent it would wish to face in combat.

"So, what do you think?" she asked expectantly.

"You look good. Strong and tough. Could be shinier, but a good start."

"Hah! Just wait till I get me one of those Rank Ups, I'll totally blow your mind! Now, where did I leave- Oh, there it is!"

The golem strutted over to where she'd left her wrench and picked it up one-handed, resting it against her shoulder as if it weighed nothing.

"Shall we go smash up some golems?" she suggested cheerfully. "There should be some of those guys left around, right?! It's okay if I go smash them to bits, right? Fizzy has a brand-new Job to Level Up!"

It was then, at that very moment, that the story of Cornie Fizzlesprocket came to its inevitable sad conclusion, the gnome she had once been quietly passing away into obscurity.

It was also on this day, again at this very moment, that the golem that would go down in history as the Rustblood Juggernaut was unleashed into the world.

Chapter Three
Core Values
Part One

The ruins of the Spire of the Jade King continued to give birth to one golem after another, albeit at a slightly reduced rate. The removal of its core didn't mean that the place would cease to exist, but there was no longer anything regulating what happened within. The golems which appeared were no longer compelled to remain and could potentially spread over the entire mountain. It would take years, possibly even decades, for a new core to appear, so the wandering golems would have plenty of time to reach civilisation, or perhaps destroy an ecosystem or two.

Assuming that they survived that long, that was.

"Haaaah!"

A mass of living steel barely a metre tall sped through the hedge maze, letting out a loud cry.

DONNN

A heavy clang rang out as Fizzy smashed shield-first into a stone soldier's shin with enough force to cause the leg to crack, swinging her wrench before the off-balance statue could react and smashing its fractured kneecap into dust. The soldier nearly toppled but managed to prop itself up with its massive shield, stabbing its spear downwards. Fizzy effortlessly dodged the awkward attack and followed up by crushing its other knee with three rapid swings of her weapon, forcing the golem flat onto its back.

She leapt onto the statue's torso and ran across its abs. She slammed its chest with her heavy weapon, the forceful impact covering its entire upper body in cracks. She took a few more steps forward and swung the wrench once more, this time aiming for the golem's stupid, handsome face. Though the hit nearly split its head in two, Fizzy was not nearly satisfied and kept hammering at it until her foe had been reduced to a literal pile of rubble.

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 15 Metal Golem! STR +3. END +3. AGI +2. FTH +1.]

"Yeaheaaah!" she cheered with a fist pump. "How's it feel to get your ass run over by the pain train, blockhead?! Get wrecked, motherfucker!"

Although the mad glint in her eyes, manic grin and high-volume shouting suggested that the Paladin was under the influence of the Champion of Chaos Skill, that was not, in fact, the case. Fizzy was simply screaming obscenities because she wanted to. While it had barely been four days since her transformation, she had completely embraced her new life of violence and slaughter. One would normally need more time to come to terms with a completely new self, but the adaptability of the gnomish mind – even a shattered one like hers – left her no time to wallow in self-doubt.

"Oh, right! Levels! Skills! I hope it's there this time!"

She stopped gloating and turned her attention to her Skill List. She had thus far unlocked two Skills from her Metal Golem Job and she was incredibly satisfied with both, especially since Boxxy had allowed her to choose them herself. While it had at first forced her to develop her Paladin occupation in a certain direction, that had been when she'd had no idea what she was doing. But now that the lich was under control and Fizzy was a full-fledged monster, there was no longer any need to dictate her Skill choices.

Quite the contrary, in fact – it was important to allow her to forge her own path. Not because of silly things like trust or benevolence, but because the Mimic could no longer confidently state the best way to make her stronger. The steel golem was so foreign and bizarre from the shapeshifting chest's viewpoint that any attempts to 'help' her would likely only prove detrimental. And since Boxxy wanted its minions to be as powerful – and therefore as useful – as possible, it had decided to leave matters to her. After all, nobody knew Fizzy's body like the woman herself, especially considering that the Mimic had spent all this time teaching her to understand her limits.

The first two Skills Fizzy had used her newfound freedom to select were Heavy Metal and Armoured Charge.

[Heavy Metal]
The golem gains a thicker skin.
Requirements: Level 5 Metal Golem
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Increases the weight of outer plating by 5% per Level of this Skill.
Increases the durability of outer plating by 3% per Level of this Skill.

The first was rather straightforward, upgrading her armoured skin to be even sturdier. This synergised excellently with the Toughness Skill from her Paladin Job, which raised the hardiness of all heavy armour with which she was equipped, even if that armour happened to be part of her own body. The added weight wouldn't hamper her mobility either, as the ample STR and END provided by both the Skill and the Metal Golem Job would compensate for it.

That said, actually getting into melee range could potentially prove to be a challenge for a relatively slow-moving chunk of steel, which was where the second ability came in.

[Armoured Charge]
Propels the golem forward like a living battering ram.
Requirements: Level 10 Metal Golem, END 45
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 35 MP
Range: 30 Meters
[Effects]
Charge in a straight line at 400% run speed.
Increases collision damage by 15% per 3 meters travelled, up to 75%.
Increases collision knockback force by 10% per level of this Skill.

This was the Skill that had allowed her to engage her latest victim at such high speed. Being able to run a full four times faster than normal allowed her to cover the Skill's thirty-metre range in seconds – far too short a window for the statue to react in time. Getting the hang of it, however, had taken some finessing, as both the acceleration and deceleration were not only effortless but instantaneous. The manner in which the Skill circumvented the basic principles of inertia and momentum was both confusing and surreal to an Artificer like Fizzy, but she had eventually given up trying to make sense of it. She just assumed that the Skill had to invoke some form of magic to fulfil its function, which was clearly indicated by the fact that it had come with an MP cost attached to it.

Magic or not, the Skill nevertheless carried its own set of dangers. There was no way for Fizzy to halt or alter her Armoured Charge. Once activated, the Skill would force her legs to move forward until she either reached its maximum range or came up against an obstacle that made it physically impossible to continue. She was fast, to be sure, but also predictable, and

she knew from first-hand experience that predictability often proved fatal in combat.

Then, of course, there was the recoil damage she suffered as a result of slamming into a stone statue at such high velocity. Admittedly, her target was generally worse off, but her own well-being obviously had to come first. This likely wouldn't be an issue with a softer, fleshier target but the opposite was true as well. Bottom line, she had to be extremely careful so as to not send herself running face-first into, say, a magically fortified castle wall. Charging straight off of ledges or cliffs was also a very real possibility.

Fizzy just hoped that her new Level 15 Skill would be less self-destructive as she surveyed her list of Skill options.

"Yesss! It's heeeere!"

And, as luck would have it, not only were there no downsides at all to the upgrade, but it was also exactly what she'd been hoping for since she had become a golem.

[Advanced Joints]
Upgrades the golem's overall speed and mobility.
Requirements: Level 15 Metal Golem
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Permanently transforms the body's joints to allow for more limber movement.
Increases the effectiveness of the AGI Attribute by 2% per Level of this Skill.
Provides an additional +2 AGI per Level of this Skill.

While her body had become much stronger since she'd abandoned her fleshy prison, the quality of her movements had degraded significantly. Her body still felt as stiff and clumsy as it had four days ago, with no sign of improvement. It wasn't a matter of mindset, practice, or lack of Attributes but a limitation of her construction, the sole disadvantage compared to her previous meatsuit. She didn't despair, though, as she'd had faith that the opportunity to upgrade herself would be forthcoming.

And now that it was here, she wasted no time taking advantage of it.

[Proficiency level increased. Advanced Joints is now Level 1. AGI +6.]

Fizzy's body froze, her mechanical muscles seizing up so completely that she couldn't even blink, let alone speak or move. She was stuck with a fierce smile on her face and both fists raised above her head in celebration, though 'happy' was far from her current state of mind.

Oh, God! What the crap!? she panicked internally. *What's going on?! This is the complete opposite of what I wanted! This isn't hap- No! None of that!*

That had been close. She'd almost given in to her old self's habit of denying reality as if that would somehow make matters different.

Come on, Fizzy! You're not that weak, pathetic creature anymore! You're a cold-hearted, ass-kicking killing machine, so start acting like one!

After forcibly calming herself with her little pep talk, the golem realised her oversight. Advanced Joints was a Skill that involved a permanent, performance-boosting physical change. It was not so much an upgrade as it was an overhaul, and those always took a lot of time. Granted, golems hadn't exactly been her field of study, but even a magically-driven machine wasn't immune to basic principles.

The slight whirring noises emanating from her body indicated that she was correct – this paralysis was merely part of the process. In a flash of inspiration, she wondered if it would be possible to use her Metallopathy Skill to examine her own body. It was something she should've already at least considered, but she'd been having too much fun smashing statues into pebbles for it to even occur to her.

She was a bit sceptical as to whether she could even accomplish it in her current condition, but that didn't appear to be an issue, as the ability in question was more mental than physical. It took some concentration, but a few seconds later she had become consciously aware of her entire being. At first it was strange and disorienting, but eventually she was able to 'feel' her own insides churning, warping and rearranging themselves as her frame cycled through its upgrade. That was a relief, as it meant that there was nothing wrong with her physically. In all likelihood, her current state was the result of some sort of autonomous self-preservation instinct, as nothing good could come from retrofitting machinery while it was in use.

Which was why she was panicking a few minutes later when the dead golem under her feet began to disappear as the renegade dungeon reabsorbed its remains. With her footing gone, her paralysed body could not avoid tumbling to the ground with a worrying clunk. Thankfully, though,

the sudden jolt wasn't enough to interfere with the internal process. But though the idea of her own negligence causing some sort of permanent defect was certainly mortifying, it was far from the worst possible outcome.

What if one of the stone golems happened upon her while she was defenceless? She may have been made of a superior material, but those walking statues had the same type of magical reinforcement as she did and were more than capable of dealing damage to her. Not much, granted, but even a little bit would be enough if she couldn't even defend herself.

The good news was that the odds of one of the things randomly popping up were pretty low. The local golems had grown both disorganised and borderline-feral ever since the dungeon's core had been taken. Not only were they no longer able to work together, but they had started attacking one another. They'd grown so scattered that Boxxy's group had seen no reason to stick together any longer and had split up in order to cover more ground. That was how Fizzy had ended up on her own to begin with, though she'd first had to prove to Boxxy that she could handle herself.

Frankly speaking, she'd been a bit insulted that it could possibly have doubted her new and improved self. Not only was her body vastly superior to its previous incarnation, but she also had the STR and END she'd gained from her Paladin Job to rely on. Attributes worked by amplifying one's base parameters, and golems had more raw power in their limbs than any enlightened meatbag could muster. Right now, Fizzy could probably take even Kora in an arm-wrestling match. In theory, at least. The two-to-one size difference would make it practically impossible to test that claim.

The bottom line was that she was able to use what she'd already had at her disposal to defeat even foes significantly above her in terms of Levels, which was what had allowed her Metal Golem Job to reach Level 15 in just over three days.

Her speedy growth had surpassed even Boxxy's. The Mimic had only managed to raise itself a sixth of the way past Level 49 of its racial Job by the time Fizzy's hit Level 10. To say that it was envious would be a massive understatement, but it couldn't exactly be helped. It had a lot more Levels than she did, so it was only natural that the same amount of fighting would not produce comparable results.

But even if constantly killing the out-of-control dungeon monsters was a bit of a grind, their seemingly-infinite supply more than made up for it.

That said, it would have preferred to reach Level 50 sooner rather than later, which was the primary reason it had ordered everyone to split up.

Which was why Fizzy was currently lying alone and paralysed in the middle of the dungeon. She kind of preferred it that way, though. She didn't particularly want the others to see her like this, mostly because she'd never hear the end of it. It was too late for regrets now, however, just like it was pointless to worry about someone happening upon her.

Deciding not to dwell on things outside her control, she instead focused her energy on studying herself with her Metallopathy. Not just the joint replacement, but her body in its entirety. Looking inside really confirmed that she was now a non-biological construct. As best she could tell, the source of the magic keeping her alive was a small, fist-sized core buried deep inside her chest cavity. It seemed to regulate and circulate magical power within her steel shell, not unlike a heart that pumped mana instead of blood.

Her head, on the other hand, was worryingly hollow, with nothing resembling a brain to be found. That probably meant that she could survive being decapitated, though not for long since it would also deprive her of her sight and hearing. As for her thought processes and memories, she saw nothing that appeared complex enough to house them other than that spherical core. It looked as though the same part was responsible for functioning as both her heart and her brain.

Fizzy wasn't sure what to make of that, as her mind viewed this as simultaneously weird and perfectly natural. The important thing was that she understood what was keeping her alive, and what region she needed to protect at any cost. It was convenient that said region was her center of mass, where her armour was thickest, but she would still lose HP even if her most precious part wasn't damaged. Though she'd die for sure if her core were to be destroyed, too much physical trauma would disturb the circulation of mana throughout her body, thereby killing her. It was the golem equivalent to bleeding out, even though golems didn't exactly have bodily fluids.

She wasn't just making assumptions, either. Her repeated battles with the stone soldiers had given her a good bit of insight as to how they were put together. Simply crushing their heads wasn't enough – she had to thoroughly pulverise their bodies in order to kill them. She preferred to aim for the head whenever possible, though. Maybe it was because they looked

so much like humans, but there was just something so satisfying about cracking their craggy craniums open.

Then, of course, there was the matter of sustenance. As a golem, she no longer required mundane things like food or water, but at the same time that meant that she was physically incapable of consuming potions or elixirs. She could still try to ingest things through her mouth, but any fluids simply leaked out through the tiny gaps in her body while solid matter was reflexively expelled from her throat.

In fact, the only thing she actually needed was rest. Not sleep, exactly, just the occasional break. Just because she was made of steel and no longer required nutrition or moisture to survive did not mean her energy reserves were infinite. Actively exerting herself for long periods of time left her tired, though not in any way she was familiar with. She didn't precisely run out of breath but instead entered a sort of low-power mode. The condition made her slow, weak, and also halved the rate at which her HP and MP recovered.

Then there was the matter of where her core was managing to draw all that energy from, but that was a mystery that she would not be able to solve anytime soon.

As far as injuries went, her metal body was perfectly capable of healing itself, just like her flesh one had. Being made of living steel certainly had its perks, but it also presented a problem – any lost parts would never grow back. The inability to use healing or mana potions was also a drawback, but her divine magic was still as effective as ever. Fizzy had used Holy Light on herself several times, in fact, as it not only restored her vitality but instantly buffed away any accumulated dents or scratches. The tiny imperfections would disappear in due time even without the Spell, but Fizzy found the idea of going about with blemishes on her frame to be strangely… un-tasty.

In fact, she was so enamoured with her new body that it was slightly terrifying. Fizzy had never before been especially proud of her looks, but now she felt so glamorous that she suspected that she was becoming a narcissist. She already felt an odd sense of prideful satisfaction whenever she realised that one of the others was looking in her direction, as no doubt they were admiring the marvellous steel goddess before them. She knew that this sort of thinking was a bit dangerous, but loving herself felt pretty damned good, so she had no intention of stopping.

"Oh? I can move again!" she exclaimed.

She'd gotten lost in her own world for a while there and hadn't even noticed that her body had regained its functionality. Her Tick Counter Skill informed her that it had been precisely six minutes and forty-two seconds since she'd been rendered immobile. Fizzy wasn't sure if this was fast or slow since it was her first experience with something like this, but the important takeaway was to avoid picking Metal Golem Skills in the field. Not all of them would augment her body to quite this extent, of course, but she had no way to be absolutely sure which ones would result in a bodily lockdown prior to picking them.

But what about Advanced Joints? Pushing herself off the ground, she sat up and moved her hands and fingers, confirming that they did indeed feel much nimbler. In fact, her quasi-mechanical limbs moved with such fluidity that it made her flesh hands look like overcooked noodles by comparison. She couldn't wait to get back to Boxxy and borrow some equipment so that she could truly see just how much difference there was.

Fizzy stood hurriedly, only to immediately trip and fall flat on her face.

"God… damn it," she grumbled into the tiles. "Good thing nobody saw that."

Tripping over her own feet because she wasn't used to moving her newly-augmented body wasn't exactly the best way to inspire confidence. Upon sitting back up, however, Fizzy realised that her fall hadn't been due to clumsiness or lack of coordination but because her trousers had fallen down around her ankles, exposing her nether regions to the world.

"… Huh?" she asked no one. "How did that happen? Did the belt snap?"

That couldn't actually be the case, though. The clothes the dungeon had spewed out were of significant quality. Her tunic and trousers were in excellent shape considering what she'd been through over the past few days and would likely last a good while longer. Though they looked plain at best and ugly at worst, the garments were made from hemp woven from Goblin Grass. The fabric was rough, but surprisingly durable for a non-enchanted garment, their sturdiness being the only reason Fizzy's metal legs hadn't torn her trousers wide open just now.

The belt was no different, as it was likely made out of some type of monster leather. Certainly not the type of accessory that would just snap, though it was possible that the fall might've broken its buckle. A closer inspection revealed that that was not the case, and that her outfit was just as

intact as it had been when she had first put it on. The only way the clasp responsible for holding her trousers up could have come undone was if someone had intentionally unbuckled it, which raised two questions: 'Who?' and 'When?'

The latter was fairly obvious. It must have happened at some point after Fizzy's body had seized up, as she was certain that it had still been in place while she'd been browsing her Skill options. There were no suspects, however, as she couldn't recall seeing anyone around her, living or otherwise. Even though she'd been paralysed, she'd still had her PER-enhanced sight and hearing, so she was sure that she'd have noticed anyone messing with her clothing.

The question of who, exactly, had caused her pants to fall down hung in the air like a stale fart. Fizzy wracked her new brain-heart, but she was having a hard time figuring out who the culprit could possibly be. It was definitely *someone,* though – this was the third inexplicable wardrobe malfunction she had experienced since the group had split up. And as a follower of Gilberto, she firmly believed that once was chance, twice was coincidence, but three was a pattern.

Perhaps she should have added 'Why?' to her list of questions, as she was failing to grasp what sort of demented poltergeist would-

"Of course! Goddamn Valeria!"

Fizzy couldn't help but shout when she realised just who was most likely responsible. As a practitioner of Necromancy, the lich was more than capable of controlling spectral entities. In fact, she was part-banshee herself, so she certainly wouldn't have lacked the means to pull off this sort of prank. It was perhaps debatable whether the insufferable creature was actually petty enough to resort to something like this, but Fizzy liked to think that she was. She also seemed like the sort of insufferable lich that would resort to this kind of petty tactic, no doubt trying to improve her standing with Boxxy by sabotaging someone else's credibility.

Having identified the likely perpetrator, Fizzy stood, pulling up her trousers and firmly affixing the belt to her waist. A task she found was significantly easier than it used to be, now that her fingers were as nimble as her wits. She of course made sure to fasten it so that it hung as low as possible in order to show off a bit more of her shiny metal skin. It felt good to put herself on display like this, even if there was nobody else around to see her. Part of her wanted to take it further, to the point where she was

walking around fully exposed, but her enlightened sensibilities demanded that she not walk around like a straight up pervert.

Fwip

Fizzy's head snapped around at the sound of fabric flapping against her bosom. Looking down, she confirmed that the puerile prankster had struck again. This time, the culprit had attempted to roll up the lower end of her tunic with the intention of putting her womanly domes on full display. However, the garment had caught on her rigid nipples and pulling it free had been the cause of the noise. If not for that, then the perpetrator would have gotten away clean, but the slip-up had allowed Fizzy to catch them red-handed.

Or rather, it would be more accurate to say that she'd caught the suspect 'right-handed.'

Because the thing stripping her clothes from her body was her own right arm.

[General Information]

Cornie Fizzlesprocket
Metal Golem (Steel), Female, 22 years old
Member of Erosa Craftsman's Union
Level 56.38 Arclight Artificer
Level 25.00 Paladin (MAX)
Level 15.04 Metal Golem
1118/1118 HP (+1.8/sec)
750/750 MP (+1.6/sec)

[Attributes]

STR 213, DEX 182, AGI 74, END 181, INT 158, WIS 164, PER 151, FTH 89, LCK 26

[Artificer Skills]

Clockwork Expertise – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Explosives Handling – Lvl 6.86
Deconstruction – Lvl 7.33
Optics Expertise – Lvl 4.76
Physics – Lvl 7.04
Component Forging – Lvl 6.63
Tick Counter – Lvl 5.22
Upgrade – Lvl 4.65

[Arclight Artificer Skills]
Electrical Expertise – Lvl 2.32
[Paladin Skills]
Champion of Chaos – Lvl 7.27
Toughness – Lvl 8.12
Strength of Faith – Lvl 7.32
Holy Scriptures – Lvl 6.87
Divine Wrath – Lvl 5.51
[Metal Golem Skills]
Heavy Metal – Lvl 2.56
Armoured Charge – Lvl 3.12
Advanced Joints – Lvl 1.04
[Other Skills]
Metallopathy – Lvl 3.34
Mentor – Lvl 2.43
Dagger Mastery – Lvl 4.89
Shield Mastery – Lvl 5.24
Holy Mastery – Lvl 7.31
Mace Mastery – Lvl 7.62

Part Two

Kora was bored out of her thick skull as she sat idly atop a boulder on the outskirts of the core-less dungeon. Boxxy still hadn't forgiven her for that little miscommunication during their initial dungeon run, so it was punishing her by letting her do absolutely nothing. *Technically* she was keeping watch on the meeting spot should Fizzy or Valeria need to get in touch with the Mimic through her, but that might as well have been nothing. Thankfully, it would seem that she was to be granted a reprieve from her boredom, as she saw the aforementioned golem approaching her at breakneck pace.

"Where is she?!" Fizzy shouted.

"Hey, squirt," the fiend answered. "Nice tits. Bit small, but the shape is great."

"I know, right?"

The ex-gnome's angry expression grew momentarily cheerful at the crass compliment, but snapped back to fury in the next instant.

"Oh, damn it! Not again!"

Flustered, Fizzy quickly lowered her rolled up tunic, once more covering her shapely chest.

"Where is that worthless slut!?" she screamed at the fiend. "I'll fucking kill her!"

"Gonna have to be more specific."

"Snack!"

"Pfft! *Ahem,*" Kora stifled a laugh. "Uhm, she's with the boss right now. I wouldn't go over there if I were you, though. They're currently… practising shapeshifting."

"Oh…"

A proverbial chill ran down Fizzy's spine. Try as she might, she hadn't quite gotten over the trauma of her first 'session.' Getting near the Mimic's writhing mass of tentacles while they were busy violating someone was not on the list of things she wanted to do, regardless of whether the victim was willing or not.

"So. They'll be busy for a while?"

"Yep," Kora confirmed with a nod.

"Guess I'll just wait here, then."

Fizzy moved closer to the fiend and climbed up onto the rock to sit down next to her. She made herself comfortable, and stood perfectly still

like a statue. Or at least, that was her intention.

"Any particular reason you're taking your pants off?"

"Again?! For Jamal's sake!"

Fizzy stopped her rebellious hands and hurriedly fixed her clothing yet again.

"Alright, I'll bite. What the fuck is wrong with you?" Kora asked. "I mean, other than the obvious."

"It's that winged bitch! She must've screwed with my head to make me strip involuntarily!"

"Hah. Hahaha! How the fuck do you manage to strip involuntarily?! Ahahaha!"

"I don't know, it just happens! I'll be walking along and then all of a sudden trip over my own feet because my hand undid the buckle on my belt without me noticing it!"

"Oh man, that is priceless! I really wanna see that now! Bahahaha!"

Surprisingly enough, that statement did not make Fizzy as upset as it should have. If anything, it almost sounded like a good idea.

"So," Kora continued, once she'd calmed down a little, "what makes you think she did anything to you?"

"Who else could it be?! These sorts of pranks are right up that bitch's alley!"

The incident where Xera had tampered with Fizzy's memory in order to make the gnome think that her own name was 'Cornhole Jizzbucket' was still fresh in her mind.

"Normally I'd agree with you, but I don't think the Slutmeister's responsible for this one."

"You're just saying that because you're addicted to her ass!"

"That's not true," Kora stated firmly. "I mean, I do love sticking it in her since she's got an ass that just won't quit, but this and that are completely unrelated."

"Yeah, right," scoffed Fizzy. "And a dragon's fire breath is just a giant reverse fart."

"Really?! That would explain so much!"

Clank

The golem's metal palm made contact with her shiny face.

"Please don't mistake my absurd metaphor for reality," Fizzy grumbled.

"Anyway! You're a golem now, right?"

"Yeah, so?"

"So… magical mind-fuckery doesn't work on golems. Like, at all. That's kinda why the boss had to rely on Rot-pussy for the dungeon crawl in the first place. Otherwise it would've just turned those statues into babbling idiots. You're a golem too, so you should be the same, right?"

Incidentally, the same trait was also shared by demons and the undead, which comprised the rest of Boxxy's entourage. It was a bit ironic, because Warlocks were by far the most common users of Domination magic, at least on this continent. Yet the carnivorous container was surrounded by allies who were impervious to it.

"I… see…"

The tiny Paladin found herself momentarily lost in thought. She'd been absolutely certain that her current situation had been the mischievous succubus's doing, but Kora was right. Her magically-fortified core simply could not be affected by magic designed to target an organic brain. The only way a golem's nucleus could be influenced was by a specially designed control rod. That was the method that people used to control artificially-made golems in order to make them into loyal servants.

"I think you're doing it again," Kora noted.

Fizzy looked down at herself and sighed dejectedly. She fixed her top for the umpteenth time, literally sitting on her hands in order to keep them from acting up. It had been almost two hours since she had become aware of this 'condition,' and she was more than a little sick of it by now. It wasn't an issue when she was fighting or otherwise engaged, but every time she was idle her arms and hands tried to remove her clothes without her even realising. She couldn't even feel it happening since she no longer had a sense of touch.

"I don't get it," Fizzy said in confusion. "If it wasn't Snack, then what else could suddenly cause this?"

"Well, to be fair, it's not really 'suddenly.' You've been sorta playing with that outfit since the moment you put it on, you know."

"What? I have?"

"Oh, yeah. You keep pulling your pants a little lower or stroking your belly like you want someone to put a bun in it. Stuff like that."

"You could've said something earlier!"

"What, and ruin the fun?!"

She let out a small chuckle, clearly enjoying the golem's misfortune.

“You wanna get your face smashed in?” Fizzy growled.

“Do you?!” Kora snapped back.

The two stared daggers at each other for a short moment before the fiend burst into laughter.

“Hahahaha! That’s the spirit! I’m really starting to like you, pipsqueak!”

Seeing that same little girl stare back at her with such a defiant glare was utterly hilarious. The day when the tiny lump of steel would challenge her to a brawl was likely not far off, and Kora was eagerly anticipating it.

“Whatever. Just keep it in your pants around me, got it?” Fizzy warned.

“Oh, believe me, I have no intention of putting my little guy anywhere near you.”

“What?! I’m too ugly for you?”

“I never said anything like that. I mean, you look pretty fuckable, if I do say so myself. Your face is nice and you got all the right curves, even if you are a bit tiny. But, like, sticking my dick inside a living mass of steel? I’m a violent asshole, not a crazy one.”

“O-Oh. Right. Sorry,” Fizzy said, honestly flabbergasted. “I don’t know what came over me just now.”

“I think I do, though. It’s the monster inside you begging to be let out. That’s probably why you keep stripping, too.”

“Huh?”

“I mean, you remember how the boss slobbered all over that shiny treasure chest back in the dungeon?”

“Yeah?”

“Same thing.”

“What?! How is that the same thing?!”

“Just hear me out. The boss is only four months old, right? It’s still got all these weird instincts and urges that catch it off guard at times because it’s still immature. It’s like a little kid that lacks boner control. The body reacts before the mind can stop it, that sort of thing.”

Kora was speaking from personal experience. Even though she was over three centuries old, that was still relatively young for a demon, not to mention that she still wasn’t completely accustomed to inhabiting a physical body for days or even weeks on end. Which was most likely why she sometimes got awkward erections that she just couldn’t explain, or why she couldn’t turn Xera down whenever the succubus practically sat on her junk.

“There’s no way a three-day-old monster like you can help herself,” she added. “That’s what I think.”

“So… what, I’m going through some sort of puberty and strip myself instinctively?!”

“I dunno. I guess?”

“How does that make any sense!?” Fizzy threw her hands into the air.

“I mean, it kinda does. Have you ever seen or known of any golems that wear clothes?”

“Ah… that’s actually a good point.”

It wasn’t entirely uncommon for artificially-made constructs to wear clothes since it helped to identify them to their owners, but they had no minds of their own. They drabbed themselves in the trappings of society not by their own will, but by the control rod dictating their every move. They were much closer to Valeria’s undead than any sentient golems that appeared in the wild, the latter of which was what Fizzy had become, barring a few complications.

“I guess you have a point there,” she admitted. “What about that Jade King, though? He was wearing a fancy-looking outfit! Ah, but then I guess that part of his body was sculpted, so he was technically naked, wasn’t he?”

The more she thought about it, the less sense it made for a monster to bother with clothes, especially if they were as well-sculpted as the stone soldiers. Fizzy may not have had much of an eye for art, but even she could appreciate the aesthetics. They couldn’t hope to compare to her own glorious form, though. Now that she thought about it, wasn’t she just the absolute best looking-

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed as the realisation dawned.

The truth of the matter was that all golems were vain and narcissistic to the extreme. Those that managed to develop some measure of intelligence might *consider* wearing clothes and/or armour for extra protection, but they would ultimately refuse. They would never allow filthy cloth or unsightly forged metal to obscure their flawless perfection. Of course, this was simply their own ingrained and overinflated opinion of themselves, which didn’t necessarily reflect reality.

Those were exactly the feelings that had plagued the former gnome ever since she’d abandoned her flesh three days ago. Her infatuation with herself had gone way beyond the simple joy of no longer being a filthy meatbag or pride in her appearance. She also realised that she’d definitely gotten just a

little too happy when Kora had offhandedly praised her looks earlier, vulgar phrasing notwithstanding. Therefore, it was highly likely that her sudden urge to be as naked as possible was indeed nothing more than part and parcel of what she had become.

However, Fizzy hadn't always been a golem. Her two decades of experience living as a person were conflicting with all these new urges, making them feel unnatural even though the exact opposite was true. This had resulted in an internal conflict wherein her subconscious urge to be seen and appreciated by others in her entirety was clashing with her conscious desire to maintain her dignity as a person.

Her newfound penchant for violence was entirely unrelated to her new status, however. The desire to inflict pain on others was just her way of relieving the stress that had been building up even before Boxxy had barged into her life.

"… I'm the weird one for wanting to dress up, aren't I?!" was her ultimate conclusion.

"Seems like it."

"I'll get better, though. Right?"

"Dunno," Kora shrugged. "What do you mean by 'get better?'"

"That… is a very good question, actually."

It really wasn't as simple as Fizzy had initially assumed. Should she embrace her new self and do away with clothes for good? She felt she'd certainly enjoy herself a lot more if she let go of her sensibilities and indulged in the desire to expose herself to everyone with eyes to see. In fact, she felt giddy at the mere thought of walking around a city with hundreds of people appreciating her naked body as she passed through.

However, going down that route would interfere with the three goals Fizzy wanted to accomplish. First of all, she wanted to resume mastering her Artificer Job. That would require resources and materials that were immensely difficult to obtain in the wild. Second, she wanted to advance her Paladin Job in order to faithfully carry out her duties as Champion of Chaos. Churchill had proven himself as her saviour and benefactor, so it was the least that she could do in return. And last, but certainly not least, was her Pledge of Arms to Boxxy. If the Mimic was planning to infiltrate a human city, then it was her oath-bound duty to be right there with it, providing support as best she could.

She had even come up with two separate plans to deter any nosy guards that might question her appearance. The first was to simply tell them a modified version of the truth – that she was a gnome Paladin who had been transformed into a golem by a powerful curse and was currently looking for a way to change back. Such fantastical stories weren't exactly unheard of in a world where magic ran rampant, so she was almost certain that it would work. If not, then she could just pretend to be the Mimic's loyal servant golem, which was more or less the case, anyway.

However, none of her plans were likely to succeed if she ran around naked like a feral creature. One had to wear clothes if they wished to manoeuvre in civilised society, which meant that she would have to find a way to contain her stripping impulses. She was confident that she could do it, now that she had realised their source. It was simply a matter of forming the right habits, and forming habits was something that she was *very* good at.

Therefore, the question wasn't whether she *could* avoid stripping, but whether she *should*.

"Could always try and ask the boss, you know," suggested Kora, noticing Fizzy's hesitation. "It's pretty clever, even if it is just a box with teeth."

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to ask, right? Alright then. Any idea when Boxxy will be back?"

"Hold on, I'll ask."

The fiend stared into the distance and sent a telepathic communication to her master.

"Hey boss, are you two, uh, still busy?"

"Yes," came the immediate answer.

"How long will you be? The little one wants to ask you something."

"Fizzy?"

"Yeah, her."

Boxxy quickly checked its status. It had three quarters of the XP needed to reach Level 50 of its Mimic Job, and its Shapeshift Skill Proficiency was two-thirds of the way to Level 10. The former was relatively easy since it just involved killing things, but the latter was proving more difficult, even with all the practise. Still, it had been experimenting with new techniques for three hours straight, so it decided that now was a good opportunity to take a break. It probably shouldn't overdo things and potentially collapse

from exhaustion, even if the Rank Up was so close that it could practically taste it.

"Okay. Bring her here."

"Whatever you say, boss."

The Mimic released Xera from its tentacles and waited patiently for the two to arrive. The succubus was a little out of it at the moment, though. Having received Boxxy's undivided attention for so long had left her as little more than a soggy, unthinking sow drowning in pleasure. Especially since the Mimic had taken to trying out various bondage and torture methods that had sent her into what could only be described as sheer carnal bliss.

Boxxy had considered using Valeria as an additional practise partner but had ultimately decided against it. It just couldn't get over how utterly foul she tasted, whereas Snack was as deliciously sweet as ever. It could, of course, form appendages devoid of taste buds, but it saw no reason to pass up Xera's succulent flavour, not when the option was available.

That was why it had sent the lich off to make herself useful by raising her Level. Valeria had claimed to be better at fighting beings of flesh and blood rather than golems, so the Mimic was allowing her to do her own thing outside the dungeon.

It did mean that the lich was nowhere in sight, but Boxxy felt confident that it could handle any scheme she might come up with. The domineering chest was in possession of her phylactery, after all, meaning that any signs of rebellion would be met with her instant destruction. It saw no issue with letting her roam unsupervised for a bit so long as she continued to diligently raise her Levels.

As for the reason it was forcing her to do that, it was because, unlike Fizzy, Valeria's only value lay in her ability to fight. If she started slacking and fell behind Boxxy in terms of power, then she would naturally have to be disciplined appropriately. There was no point in keeping a servant who refused to fulfill their purpose. Boxxy was therefore quite pleased with the golem's rapid development. Her new habit of rushing head-first into battle with that charging Skill of hers would probably need to be corrected at some point, though.

The Mimic quietly contemplated how to best put its minions to work until Arms and Fizzy found its resting spot about ten minutes later. Navigating the area was a lot simpler now that the maze's auto-repair

function was no longer working. The golem and the fiend simply had to follow the trail of freshly-burned hedges until they found Boxxy and its pyromaniac familiar.

"Hey, boss, we're here!" Kora greeted it.

She glanced over to Xera, who was still wallowing on the ground and looking indecently blissed-out, her body still spasming lightly from the aftershocks of Boxxy rocking her world.

"Can I get sloppy seconds?" she asked hopefully.

"Not now." Boxxy turned its attention towards the pint-sized Paladin. "What is it, Fizzy?"

The golem tore her curious gaze away from the insensate succubus and explained her conundrum. How she wasn't sure whether she should accept her monstrous side or cling to the remnants of her dignity as a person. Her concerns, however, were a bit too complicated for the simple-minded Mimic to comprehend. Or rather, it failed to see why there was any dilemma in the first place.

"You need to wear clothes when talking to people, right?" it asked, just to confirm.

"Yeah," answered Fizzy.

"But you think that not wearing them is tastier."

"Uhm. That is one way of putting it, yes."

Boxxy certainly had to agree with her on that point. Clothes were bothersome things that got in the way of its shapeshifting, so it disliked the idea of them on principle. And yet, it still couldn't see why this was even a question.

"So why not do both?"

"… Huh?"

"Wear clothes when you're around people. Don't wear them when you're not."

"But… there's no point if I'm not seen…"

Her impulse wasn't just to be naked, it was to show off her naked body. Which demanded the attention of others. *Many* others.

"I'm here, and I can see you," the Mimic pointed out.

"Well, yes, but I don't think that'll be enough. Something tells me I won't be satisfied unless… Wait… Hold on a minute!"

A thought had just occurred to Fizzy.

Mimics were creatures that, barring some skilful shapeshifting, typically lacked eyes or ears of their own. Instead, they relied on a sort of magical sonar which allowed them to perceive the sounds, shapes and colours around them. Although the ability had limited range and could be fooled under certain circumstances, it was nonetheless extremely accurate and was capable of 'seeing' through most surfaces. That was at least partly why Boxxy was so skilled at being an Artificer. In fact, its steadily growing PER Attribute boosted the accuracy of its magical perception field even further, allowing it to perceive the otherwise-invisible fluctuations of mana in the air.

Fizzy had learned all of this over the course of the past month. How could she not, after spending so much time with the creature? The details had somehow slipped her mind in all the excitement of being reborn, but now she suddenly remembered.

"You- you can see inside me, can't you?" she asked in a strangely shaky voice.

"Yes. Actually, it looks different from yesterday. Especially in the shoulders, knees and elbows. Did something happen?"

"Y-yeah. I got a new Skill that upgraded them."

"I see."

"How- How much of my body can you see?"

"All of it."

"Even my c-c-c-core?"

"Yes."

A complicated emotion took hold of Fizzy. The Mimic before her was able to perceive her steel frame in its entirety in a way that went well beyond simple nakedness. Every fibre of her being right down to her innermost depths had been laid bare before it, and yet she didn't feel repulsed, disgusted or creeped out. In fact, she was filled with an odd sense of confidence and joy.

"What do you think of it?" she asked, almost giddy with happiness. "My core, I mean?"

"Complicated. Round. Sturdy. Shiny."

Those simple words sent a wave of euphoria washing over the ex-gnome, making her entire body shudder with delight. The deepest, most precious part of her had been seen and praised by someone who was truly able to appreciate its glory. She knew right away that this was a sensation

that no faceless masses could ever offer her. To even think that a bunch of common plebeians were capable of truly comprehending the work of art that she had become was almost an insult.

No, the only gaze that mattered was that of Boxxy T. Morningwood.

Part Three

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 50 Mimic! All Attributes +2.]

"YeSHAAAA!"

Boxxy cheered as the final statue crumbled within its spike-covered tentacles. It had at last reached its maximum Mimic Job Level at the end of the fourth day of stalking the crippled dungeon's hedge maze. All that was left now was to raise Shapeshift to Level 10 and the Mimic would finally, at long last, be able to Rank Up.

"Congratulations, Master!"

"Yeah, way to go, boss!"

"Ahh, my darling is splendid as usual!"

"Nice one, Boxxy!"

The creature's unlikely entourage, having been ordered to follow it once the Mimic had reached ninety percent XP, all congratulated it in their own way.

Valeria's newly-created undead regiment was also skulking around the place. She had gone for a mix of Death Knights, Dullahans and a whole lot of Skeletal Archers, a configuration well suited to hunting wild beasts in the woods. Boxxy had also discovered, much to its disappointment, that the lich-created undead yielded no XP when slain. Which made sense, as they were beings made up of more mana than flesh, not dissimilar to the Mimic's own familiars.

"What happens now?" Fizzy asked.

"Shapeshifting practice."

Valeria and Xera's faces lit up like dogs offered a treat, though the golem and the fiend had no interest in taking part.

"In that case," Fizzy said, "I'm going to go and raise my Level a bit."

Unlike Kora, who was only opposed because she didn't get to be 'on top,' the Paladin was not even remotely interested in such things. While there was the matter of her traumatic experience, it was also that her steel body simply had no sex drive to speak of, similar to a certain animate chest. Even the pleasure she got from being 'seen' couldn't be considered sexual. It was more akin to the feeling of satisfaction and giddiness one would experience after eating a sumptuous meal followed by a few glasses of wine. Therefore, she saw no reason to stick around.

Unfortunately, Boxxy had other plans.

“Fizzy, I need you for this one.”

The golem froze. Whatever thoughts she may have had were forgotten, replaced by a single troubling idea.

*It couldn’t seriously mean **that**, right?*

“W-why do you need m-me?” she asked stiffly.

Boxxy explained its problem. Simply put, it needed to keep trying out new things if it wanted to increase its Shapeshift Skill Level, which was only reason that it had engaged in the lewd ‘activities’ in the first place. The sheer amount of biomass, complexity and movement involved had provided it with lots of proficiency, resulting in a tasty net total of fifty-six percent progress towards Level 10.

But it would appear that that method had reached its limit, as the Mimic’s last few training sessions had been extremely disappointing. It had gained merely a single percent Proficiency after a whole two hours of practise. It seemed that there was little more that it could learn there, so what it needed right now was a brand-new direction towards which it could focus its shapeshifting. Unfortunately, it was somewhat lacking in imagination, which was why it had decided to ask its minions.

The golem and the fiend both breathed sighs of relief upon realising that they wouldn’t be roped into anything unpleasant again. The Slobbering Slut Squad, as Kora had taken to calling the other two, was understandably disappointed. Not only because there would be no happy fun times with Boxxy right now, but also because the implication was that there would be no happy fun times with Boxxy ever again.

“You can turn parts of your body into metal, right? Have you tried producing Artificer-made goods from it?” was Fizzy’s initial suggestion.

The Mimic responded by instantaneously covering its faux-wood shell in dozens of Bladeblossoms, demonstrating that it had not only tried, but mastered the skill. Fizzy was quite impressed with the sheer speed with which it could produce them, not to mention the number, but ultimately the things would be of little use in combat. The petal-shaped blades would return to soft flesh the instant that they were separated from the main body, meaning that setting them off would merely cover the area in strips of shapeless flesh-goo. Something that nobody present particularly wanted to see.

“What about imitating someone who isn’t that dimwitted succubus?” asked Valeria. “Or, more specifically, me!”

Boxxy's lid flew open and a pure white replica of the lich's upper body sprang out.

"Humanoids are all the same," it commented. "There's nothing more I can learn there."

"What about skin colour, Master?" Xera chimed in.

"What about it?"

"Pigmentation is important for infiltrating a city. We talked about this before, remember."

"Oh, right."

It had nearly forgotten that particular lesson in blending in. Truthfully speaking, it mainly continued to create the chalk-white skin simply because colouring it was a tricky, annoyingly lengthy process. It wasn't that the Mimic was lazy, it just found it unnecessary to put so much effort into something that it personally considered to be of trivial importance. It hadn't even bothered with colouring the skin of its hybrid form back in Erosa because its height was already much too conspicuous anyway. But, as Xera had pointed out, getting the colouration of the skin, eyes and hair right was extremely important to inconspicuously blending in with civilised society.

The only time Boxxy had even attempted to fully colour itself in was when it had had to pretend to be Fizzy, and it had messed that up badly. Its skin had been slightly too tanned, the eyes an unnatural yellow and the hair had been closer to purple than pink. The only reason that it had managed to fool the one human that had seen it was because he'd been a random passerby with no idea of what the gnome had actually looked like.

So, Boxxy decided to give altering its pigmentation another try. Splotches of beige appeared on the imitation-Valeria's body, expanding through the white skin like globs of ink spreading across paper. The twin-tail hairdo gradually turned black, looking much like Valeria's original, human appearance.

"How's this?" it asked once it was done.

"It could… use some work, Master."

That was an understatement. Objectively speaking, Boxxy's attempt at skin pigmentation had failed horribly. There were various differently-coloured patches of flesh, giving it the freakish appearance of skin sewn together from multiple corpses. Even the hair was noticeably darker on one side.

"Okay, I'll practise this part later," Boxxy decided.

Shapeshifting proficiency aside, it did need to master this if it wanted to be able to move freely within a city. It was quite pleased with Snack's input, though. She really knew her stuff when it came to infiltration. As expected of a conniving, backstabbing and malicious demon.

As for Valeria, she was at a loss for words. Allowing Boxxy to use her physical appearance had been nowhere near the vaguely-romantic gesture she'd had in mind when she'd suggested it. In fact, she was understandably disturbed, but it was only natural that seeing a parody of her old human form would strike a nerve. Xera had been in the same boat back when Boxxy had first begun using her image to cast Spells, but she had since grown more or less accustomed to it.

"Oh! I know!" Kora shouted. "How about combining things?"

"Combining things?"

"You know, like a whatchamacallit! A chimichanga?"

"… Do you mean a chimera?" Xera corrected her.

"Yeah, that!"

"What's that?" asked Boxxy.

"It's a monster created by mortal Alchemists, Master," the succubus explained, "usually by combining the traits of several existing creatures into one. For example, a beast with the head and forelegs of a janther, the body and hindlegs of a goat and a snake for a tail."

"So, it can be other things?"

"Yes, Master."

"Is it a shapeshifter?"

"Not exactly," Xera pursed her lips. "It's just that elves and humans like to do weird experiments and sometimes wind up producing different combinations. I think those griffins the Empire uses might be a type of chimera. I mean, they certainly weren't around a few hundred years ago and new monster species don't just pop out of the blue like that."

"Oh, I see. So, a chimera might be something like this?"

Boxxy shifted its humanoid form into a ghastly creature with four spider-like limbs for arms, a quartet of giant crustacean claws for hands, a horse's head with curved ram horns, a thick, scaly tail, and goblin legs for nipples. Short brown fur covered everything else.

"Okay. I was… not mentally prepared for that," Fizzy mumbled.

"I don't think any of us were," Valeria echoed the sentiment.

The two demons nodded in agreement. The thing really couldn't be called anything other than horrific. And this was coming from a bunch of monsters, so regular people would probably end up involuntarily evacuating their bowels if they were ever to lay eyes on it. In fact, Fizzy was silently thanking her new god that she no longer possessed such functions, else she might have seriously put that claim to the test.

At the very least, it seemed that she had her weird stripping habit under control. After all, Boxxy could see through both her plain clothes and sturdy steel hide. Her subconscious must have realised that removing her clothing was pretty pointless, given the circumstances. In fact, just knowing that she was within its passive perception range was enough to satisfy her borderline-exhibitionistic tendencies. She even had the strangest feeling that she could tell when the Mimic was focusing its attention on her.

That sensation wasn't just her imagination. The miniscule waves of mana that Boxxy subconsciously used to keep track of its surroundings caused a very slight interference with the magic permeating the steel golem's body. Her nucleus picked up the currents, relaying them to her conscious mind as the strangely-empowering feeling of being 'watched,' driving her to stick as close to Boxxy as she could. In fact, she'd started to feel irritable and tense whenever she was apart from the Mimic for too long, as though she were already addicted to its permeating gaze.

Fizzy was wondering whether this was a good or bad thing when another, much more pressing concern came to mind.

"Hey, Boxxy," she spoke up. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ribbit?"

"Uh…"

Realizing that a horned horse head was less than ideal for communication, the Mimic undid its bizarre transformation and reverted back to a simple chest with Xera's face on the front. It would revisit this chimera concept later. The idea definitely had potential, though it wasn't sure whether it would be able to gain much Proficiency from it. The amalgamation of copied body parts wasn't something that could be considered an 'original work,' for lack of a better term.

"What is it, Fizzy?"

"You won't have a mimic's body after you Rank Up, right?"

"Probably not."

"Will you still be able to see things the same way you do now?"

She was wondering whether the monster's magical perception ability would disappear, though it was mostly a selfish concern. She was worried that her perfectly-put-together body wouldn't get the appreciation and attention that it deserved if the Mimic could no longer perceive it with the same invasive level of detail.

"… I don't know," the creature answered after a brief pause. "Maybe."

Boxxy was gripped by a foreboding, almost melancholic feeling.

Its species would change with the Rank Up.

While it had known full well that that would happen, this time it wouldn't turn into a better version of what it already was, but a completely different type of monster. It had been aware of this, yet it hadn't truly considered the implications until Fizzy had brought it up.

What the former gnome had experienced hadn't been too dissimilar to a Rank Up, after all. As a result, she had undergone a series of radical changes, both mentally and physically. In fact, she was still adapting to her new self. And while there were many things that she had gained from the change, there had been just as many she'd lost.

Her newfound numbness to pain came at the cost of her sense of touch, smell and taste, and while she no longer required food or water, she had lost the ability to ingest healing potions. She had gained a deeper understanding of metal through her Metallopathy Skill, but at the cost of her flexibility and dexterity. True, she'd regained those thanks to the Advanced Joints Skill, but she'd had to give up the chance at a different Skill in order to do so.

Looking at Fizzy's rather unique case was causing Boxxy to have second thoughts about its impending Rank Up. Losing its magical perception ability would be a huge setback. It could not be understated how invaluable something like that was to a creature that primarily fought at close range, to say nothing of how convenient it was for practising its Artificer Job.

And yet, while those were all valid, practical concerns, the Mimic was equally concerned that it might be forced to give up its chesty disposition. Unlike a certain abused gnome, it didn't feel comfortable letting go of its current form. It had overcome numerous near-death situations and agonising experiences in order to develop a sense of self and establish its individual identity. It loathed the idea of having to abandon either of those things.

"But you'll still be a shapeshifter-type, right?"

Fizzy continued her line of questioning, completely oblivious to the Mimic's inner turmoil. The distraction was hardly a bad thing, though, as it helped Boxxy to realise that it still had no idea what Rank Up options would be available, nor what effects they might have. It therefore decided that worrying before it had all the details would be a waste of effort. It certainly wasn't going to put off a potentially life-changing decision just because it was afraid of the unknown.

Besides, the lump of metal was right. It wasn't as though a mimic could suddenly become a harpy or a goblin, after all. No matter what, it should at least still be a shapeshifter of some kind. Just like Fizzy would undoubtedly still be a golem and Valeria would remain undead regardless of how many Rank Ups they experienced. The Paladin's drastic transition from gnome to golem had been caused by a curse rather than the standard Rank Up process, so it couldn't even be called an exception. It was an entirely different situation.

"Most probably," Boxxy answered, after it had collected its thoughts.

"So then, can't you just grow back the thing that gives you that magnificent sight?"

"What?"

"I mean, did you have any eyes when you were born?"

"No."

"But you can make them with shapeshifting."

"Yes."

"So, it should be possible for you to recreate the 'eye' that lets you see all around you after you Rank Up, right? I mean, just in case you no longer have it."

"… But I don't know how to do that."

"That's why I'm suggesting you start practising now, while you still have the chance!"

"Oh, I see! That is a very tasty idea!"

"Hehehehe!" Fizzy giggled delightedly at the praise.

"Ack!" Valeria gasped. "When did the short one become a love rival?!"

The Paladin splendidly ignored the worthless whore of a wraith and continued to bask in the glow of the Mimic's approval. It was one of the few genuine compliments Boxxy had ever given her, so she wasn't going to allow such a ridiculous insinuation to ruin it. She most definitely did not 'love' the mass-murdering, man-eating monster. How did that even make

sense? What she felt was respect for her superior and caretaker. Boxxy was Fizzy's mentor as a monster, so its words would naturally carry extra weight. It was simply a matter of course that she would get excited whenever those words were even the tiniest bit flattering or affirmative.

… Yes, that must have been what the feeling was.

"Okay, I'll give it a try right away."

Boxxy had decided to make Fizzy's suggestion top priority. It had a feeling that what it was about to attempt wouldn't be easy, meaning that it would probably lead to a sizable increase in its Shapeshift proficiency. Assuming that it was able to succeed, of course, but first things first. It focused its gaze inwards, bringing its attention to the very core of its magical perception.

Mimics sensed their surroundings with an organ which scholars had named the Mana Locator Gland, or MLG for short. While surprisingly common amongst monsters, the curious thing about it was how wildly it varied between different species. Janther whiskers, griffin beaks, treant roots and dragon horns were all examples of this gland. They were all sensitive to changes in the ambient mana, but each worked in different ways. A janther's whiskers, for example, could detect whether a Spell was being cast with them as the target and discern when illusions, invisibility and other magical trickery was afoot. A treant's roots worked in much the same way, except that they sensed magic through vibrations in the soil, making them useless against flying threats.

However, none of the creatures' sensory organs could compare to those of a naturally sightless monster, like a mimic, slime or primordial elemental. Those species typically had no other senses with which to navigate their surroundings, so it was only natural that their Mana Locator Glands would be far more advanced. And while, say, a dragon's horn provided enough information to be called a second sight, it could only encompass a conical shape expanding backwards from its head. It allowed the mighty wyrms to protect their blind spots and verify their body's condition without having to turn their long necks, yet certain Spells and materials were simply outside the scope of the horn's detection.

In short, it could be said that Boxxy's 360-degree all-scope MLG had top-of-the-line performance. Though it couldn't cover huge distances, the sheer volume and accuracy of the sensory data it was able to pick up was second only to that of beholder demons. But no matter how excellent it was,

it could not observe itself. Like an eye trying to look inwards or a nose trying to pick out its own scent, it was simply impossible for the Mimic to examine its own MLG. Although Boxxy knew where it was located, it had no idea what it even looked like, much less how it was put together.

But it refused to give up so easily. If it could make an organic wheel, then it could figure out how to observe the source of its magical perception by employing that very same sense. The obvious solution would be to find another mimic to use as an example, but would theirs even be the same? Boxxy was a Greater Mimic, so it was highly possible that a lesser variant of the species would have an inferior MLG. It was a moot point anyways, as Boxxy didn't have the slightest clue where it could find others of its kin.

This was frustrating. If only it had a second gland somewhere, then it would already be-

Boxxy was struck by a flash of inspiration. It had gotten an idea that just might work. It went completely silent as it began to consider how to go about accomplishing its idea. A plan was slowly coming together. A dangerous, extreme, unquestionably painful plan, but a necessary one if Boxxy didn't want to lose one of its most valuable assets when it Ranked Up.

It would be difficult, but the Mimic was certain that it could make it happen. This was far from the first time that it had researched its own body, after all. It just needed to put all of its limited knowledge to good use and it was bound to accomplish something. Even failure could be a useful learning experience. Like the first time that it had tried to grow a set of wheels, only to have them violently snap off. Or when it had nearly killed itself overloading its sensory capacity with a multitude of eyes. Then there had been the time it had fallen fifty metres off a cliff while it was learning to fly…

On second thought, perhaps, just this once, some moderation was in order.

Part Four

The Mimic opened its maw and extended two tongue-tentacles, each gripping one of its favourite mithril daggers. The blades flashed ominously as it thrust them unhesitatingly into the right side of its rectangular body, carving deeply into its own flesh. It stifled a pained hiss as viscous yellow blood splattered the ground. The Mend Flesh Skill kicked in immediately and began healing the wound with the daggers still inside. The pain was even more intense as its body tried and failed to close the wound around the metal blades.

The sudden, inexplicable violence sent its minions into a panic. From their perspective, the Mimic had been sitting calmly ever since it had said that it would give Fizzy's idea a try about five minutes ago. They had assumed that it was simply busy doing its shapeshifting thing on the inside, so Boxxy suddenly stabbing itself had caught them all by surprise. Fizzy and Xera seemed most concerned, begging the wounded creature to tell them what was going on as they approached it cautiously.

"Be quiet and don't touch me!" Boxxy howled, silencing all of their voices. "I'm working here!"

Once it had recovered about half of its lost HP, it disabled the Mend Flesh Skill, steeled its nerve and ripped its side open even more deeply. It turned Mend Flesh back on for only a second or two before gouging into its flesh for the third time, the others able to do nothing but watch in a mixture of shock and horror. The only one who wasn't worried was Kora, who instead found herself impressed by her boss's lack of mercy, even towards itself.

The fiend was no stranger to pain, after all. It wasn't that she couldn't feel it, but that she had simply grown accustomed to it. She'd be a failure as a fiend if she was afraid of something so mundane as being hurt. Not even losing a limb or being cut in half could stop her from trying to smash her target to bits. Even if she were reduced to nothing but a head, she'd still try to bite off her enemy's ankles and rip out their throat. Seeing her own master fearlessly endure the pain of slicing out its own insides only increased her respect for it.

In Kora's honest opinion, the wooden box was quite ballsy for a mortal, especially considering that it didn't technically have those body parts to begin.

"So this is how it managed to escape those restraints…"

As for Fizzy, she was only just now realising how the Mimic had broken loose from the magic-sealing bindings that had been literally bolted into its flesh. She'd wondered about it more often than she cared to admit, but until now she'd never even considered that it could have actually gouged them out itself. The Paladin had to admit that, had she been in its place, she could never have been brave enough to do such a thing. And now, while she could no longer feel pain, the mere thought of besmirching her flawlessly perfect body felt like sacrilege.

She looked down at her shining steel hands and gripped her fists, silently chastising herself for still being so naive. If Boxxy wasn't beyond mangling its own body in order to survive, then she would need to find the courage to do so as well, should it ever become necessary for either of their survival.

It was the bare minimum level of conviction that she would need if she truly wanted to stand by its side rather than grovel in its shadow.

"Ah, Master…" Xera whispered. "Why must you do this to yourself when I'm right here…"

The succubus had somehow been able to grasp what her master was trying to do, and she desperately wanted to help, to offer herself up in order to be of use to her beloved. Her past self would probably have mocked her mercilessly for wanting to support a heartless, unfeeling monster, especially one that could never hope to reciprocate her affection. Indeed, some of her best work had involved manipulating men into destroying themselves for her sake, even though they had nothing to gain from it. The Xera of the past had been a devious woman, seeking only pleasure and entertainment at the expense of others.

And while that part of her hadn't exactly changed, she wished, for various reasons, that she could be the one her master was carving into right now.

Valeria watched in total silence, trying to process the ghastly sight. She'd been on good terms with the Mimic for only a few days, and thus hadn't really had the chance to get a firm grasp on its personality. If anything, the creature's intentions only proved more and more undecipherable with each passing day. The only thing that she could say for certain was that it was the best lay she'd ever had – which was really all she needed to know at the moment. She was sure that the two of them would be getting much better acquainted in the very near future.

"Nasty, come here!"

Something that might just wind up happening sooner rather than later.

"Of course, darling!" the lich cooed as she floated up to the Mimic. "What can your future bride do for you? Or… *to* you?"

Boxxy had stopped its self-mutilation once the huge, bleeding gash was roughly twenty centimetres deep and six centimetres wide. It had splendidly carved a hole into its flesh, using Mend Flesh to ensure that its HP didn't suffer too much while also preventing the incision from closing up completely by continuing to pry it open with its daggers. And yet this was only the first part of Boxxy's impromptu self-surgery.

"Frostbolt the wound!" it ordered.

"Wha?! Th-that's not what I-"

"Now!"

Why on earth was the woman stalling?! Just because Boxxy was in no danger of dying didn't mean that its little stunt wasn't utterly agonising!

"F-Frostbolt!" chanted the flabbergasted Valeria.

Her bright blue projectile flew at the wound, freezing the Mimic's insides in an instant. It felt a momentary sense of disorientation as its typically-always-on magical perception was disabled for the second time in its life. The daggers moved once more as Boxxy broke something off from its interior, then carefully coiled a free tentacle around the frozen, apple-sized MLG, dragging it into the open. It reactivated its Mend Flesh Skill and waited patiently for the massive, self-inflicted wound to heal. A brand new, fully functioning MLG grew where the old one had been a few seconds later as though it had never been gone to begin with.

That was the solution that Boxxy had come up with. Cutting away the organ in question and relying on Mend Flesh to grow a new one would allow it to, essentially, have two of them. There were some parts of the Mimic's body that it was simply unable to shapeshift, and the area around the gland was unfortunately one of them. Otherwise it could just have willed it outside of its shell or grown an eye inside its body to observe it.

The Frostbolt had been necessary since a shapeshifter's flesh was highly unstable, and any severed parts would turn to nondescript piles of mush the instant they lost contact with the main body. Boxxy wasn't sure whether this applied to its unchangeable insides, but it wasn't about to take any chances, as it *really* didn't want to undergo the excruciating procedure more than once. That was where Valeria's Permafrost magic came in. Freezing

the organ solid meant that it would retain its shape even after it was technically dead.

And now that its ever-useful magical perception had kicked back in, Boxxy was able to gain all kinds of information regarding the frozen lump of flesh. The Mimic committed as much as it could to memory before the gland thawed and fell apart. It would appear that freezing it had indeed been the correct move, as it had provided the creature with a blueprint with which to work. Granted, it wasn't exactly ideal, but it was a start, which was all Boxxy T. Morningwood ever needed to get down to business.

It immediately attempted to replicate its observations inside its mouth cavity. The Mana Locator Gland appeared to be in the shape of an hourglass, with two smallish lumps connected by a thin stretch of flesh. The bulbous parts actually seemed as though they were made up of dozens of layers of membranes upon muscles upon membranes upon muscles, all the way down to a dense nerve cluster at their center. Its knowledge of anatomy and living tissue helped the Mimic to determine that, based on its structure, the organ was meant to pulse continuously. Like a human heart, but at a much higher frequency.

Meanwhile, its minions had recovered somewhat from their earlier shock. Boxxy had healed its wound and gone silent, indicating that its sudden act of self-mutilation had served its purpose, and as a result the four of them had calmed down significantly. They silently agreed to give the Mimic some space, lest they distract it from… whatever it was doing, and moved to a spot some twenty metres away.

"Nnnnnk," Valeria whimpered. "I hope my darling doesn't hate me for this…"

"I wouldn't worry about that," Xera reassured her.

"Do you really mean that?!"

"Of course. Master has never liked you in the first place."

"As if! You're just jealous!"

"Sure, keep telling yourself that, *Nasty*."

"Humpf! At least I'm not something meaningless like a Snack!"

"Indeed, woe is me," the succubus chortled. "Forever destined to receive Master's attention and provide it with joy. To be devoured over and over and, hmmm, over…"

"W-well, that's only because of your supposed flavour," Valeria insisted. "I'm sure my darling can easily overlook something so

superficial!”

“I doubt it.”

“Ditto.”

Neither demon was under any illusion about *that*.

“Actually, Boxxy also cares about shiny things,” Fizzy said smugly.

“I suppose that’s true,” Xera mused. “Although you’re not nearly shiny enough to satisfy it.”

“I’m not?!”

“Of course not. Steel just doesn’t have the same lustre as gold or mithril.”

“Hmm… that’s a good point. Maybe I should look into finding some metal polish.”

“Could always try using vinegar,” Kora suggested. “I remember one of my brothers saying that it was a great way to get the blood and guts off his spear. Also, something about how it made stroking the shaft a lot of fun.”

Fizzy flashed the fiend a suspicious look.

“Was he talking about his weapon or his penis?”

“… Now that you mention it, I’m not really sure. Could be either, or both.”

“Ugh, should have known,” the golem groaned.

“Are all demons like this?”

Valeria couldn’t help but be curious since every other word from Kora’s mouth seemed to be a double entendre.

“Haah,” Xera sighed. “Please don’t judge the rest of us by this meathead’s standards. While it’s true that all she ever thinks about is fighting and/or fucking, that only applies to fiends.”

“But you don’t seem to be all that different.”

“Of course I am. Unlike dick-on-legs over there, I don’t let sex dominate my life. I only take part because I don’t see a reason to decline pleasure because of petty things like pride, honour, or dignity.”

“I see… Still, I feel like I’ve been missing out. I should’ve been a Warlock rather than a Necromancer.”

Having a fiend familiar sounded like something she would enjoy very much. If she’d known more about demons and Warlocks while she had still been alive, she likely would have made some radically different life choices.

“Hah,” Xera scoffed. “You wouldn’t last a week before your familiar got you killed.”

“As if I’d give them a chance. I’d only be using them for their dicks, anyway.”

“That’s exactly why you’d die, honey. A fiend would rip a little girl like you in half without even trying.”

“She’s right, you know,” Kora chimed in. “It hurts to say this, but mine’s actually on the small side by fiend standards, and even then, the only reason this bitch over here can take it is because she’s way bendier than mortals. Any one of my brothers would shatter your spine on the first thrust if you let them.”

“Oh my God!” Fizzy shrieked in frustration. “Are dicks all you meatbags ever think about?!”

“Kinda.”

“Pretty much.”

“More or less.”

The golem put her palms over her face as she walked away.

“Where you off to all of a sudden, squirt?”

“I’m going to sit next to Boxxy where I can be quietly appreciated.”

“Hah! Now whose head is filled with lewd thoughts?!” Xera taunted.

“Bet she’s frustrated because she can’t feel anything down there,” Kora smirked.

“Bite my shiny metal ass!” Fizzy snarled. She gave them all the finger and headed back to the Mimic’s side.

“How rude!” Valeria sniffed.

“Indeed,” the succubus agreed, surprisingly. “I should speak to Master about disciplining her more thoroughly. It would not be good if her cocky attitude pissed off the wrong person and compromised its cover.”

The steel golem’s desire to publicly accompany Boxxy wherever it went was something of a potential issue, though it paled in comparison to the lich-sized red flag next to her.

“So anyway, tell me more about these brothers of yours, Red!” the obstacle in question changed the subject.

“Right, so get this. I have this older brother called Junfirpilak, right? But everyone just calls him Four-head.”

“Let me guess,” Xera rolled her eyes. “It’s because his physical form has two actual heads and two dicks, right?”

“What? No! I mean, my sister Sthrirniszath does, but she’s an archfiend. Anyway, we call him Four-head because he told us about this one time with a hydra-”

Several hours passed idly as Kora and Xera relayed the tales they’d heard from their kin during their time in the Beyond. Stories were one of a demon’s main venues of entertainment, so they often shared their interesting experiences amongst themselves. Kora herself had bragged incessantly about getting to take part in the Calamity during the few weeks of ‘vacation’ she’d had after her contract with Boxxy had been terminated. It had made her quite popular among her peers.

Fizzy, on the other hand, had seated herself next to Boxxy, basking in the knowledge that the Mimic was keeping its ‘eye’ on her. While her golem body didn’t need rest, exactly, her gnomish mind still accumulated stress and mental fatigue, so taking a break to relax like this every now and then was a good thing.

As for Boxxy, it had been silently working on replicating the MLG from memory. The two nerve clusters were proving tricky to duplicate, and actually hooking it up to its nervous system wasn’t particularly easy either. Once it had managed to reconstruct the organ, it then had to try actually turning it ‘on.’ This had proved to be immensely difficult, as the gland normally functioned autonomously. It briefly considered attempting to gouge out another one, but decided to keep trying as is. After all, painful things were painful, so it wouldn’t subject itself to them unless it was necessary.

And finally, after dozens, if not hundreds, of failed attempts, the hourglass-shaped mass of flesh finally started pulsating. It vibrated wildly, its frequency so high that the wrinkled flesh almost appeared fuzzy. Just as Boxxy had theorised, this mode of operation was the main reason it had so many layers of springy muscle – the MLG would have surely torn itself to pieces otherwise.

A second magical perception field started feeding information into the Mimic’s mind, nearly overloading its mental capacity. Thankfully, unlike the incident with the twenty eyes, it had well developed INT, WIS and MNT Attributes that helped it to remain conscious and in control, albeit severely disoriented. Now that both Mana Locator Glands were capable of seeing each other and Boxxy was able to get a sense of how the original

worked in real time, it was able to fine tune its replica to correct some of its flaws.

When it was finally satisfied with its manufactured MLG, it dissolved the gland back into formless flesh and reconstructed it once more from scratch. When the sensory organ was once more up and running, it repeated the procedure time and time again, growing more and more accustomed to the process. The sun had already set by the time it finished making its fourth working MLG.

[Proficiency level increased. Shapeshift is now Level 10. END +2. DEX +1. AGI +1.]

"… Eh?"

Boxxy couldn't help but be confused, as it hadn't expected the Skill to Level up quite so quickly. Even if it *had* been at seventy-something percent Proficiency when it began its endeavour, it had assumed that it would need at least another few days to push its flesh-shaping ability to this point. Then again, the seemingly-innocuous bundle of muscles and nerves was the most intricately complex thing it had attempted to replicate thus far, so reaching Level 10 already actually made a good deal of sense.

Mild surprise aside, it wasn't as though this was a bad thing. It needed Shapeshift at Level 10 in order to Rank Up, and now it was. That said, Boxxy uncharacteristically showed a bit of restraint and put off its Rank Up in order to practise making the MLG, until it was confident that it could make one at will.

It definitely wasn't putting off its decision because it was worried what its Rank Up screen would say. That was not it *at all*.

Once it was done having doubts, it summoned its minions to its side to inform them that it would be undergoing the next stage of its evolution. The women were delighted at the news, as all of them were quite eager to see what would become of Boxxy once it Ranked Up. However, the Mimic certainly wasn't about to do it right here and now. The last time it had gone through a Rank Up, the process had taken a number of days, during which it had been passed out and entirely defenceless.

A dungeon was no place to enter into such a vulnerable state, so it led its posse over to a small opening in a nearby cliff. It was more of a hole at the bottom of a rock wall than an actual cave, but it was a far more defendable resting spot than an open field or a golem-infested hedge maze.

After instructing its minions to stand by, Boxxy finally spoke the two words that it had been simultaneously dreading and anticipating.

"Rank Up!"

[Rank Up – Mimic (Greater)]

Requirements: Level 50 Mimic Job, Level 10 Shapeshift, END 200

The Requirements have been met.

You may now Rank Up by using one of the following options:

[Doppelganger]

[Queen Metal Slime]

[Queen Shadow Slime]

[Cancel Rank Up]

… Well, choices were probably a good thing. Curiously enough, two of its options appeared to be queen slime variants. It knew about their lesser versions, as it had hunted them as part of its Quests for the Mercenary Guild. They were amorphous blobs of differently-coloured liquid with a small, black nucleus that served as their brain. As far as their shapeshifting abilities went, they were actually fairly impressive. They could bend their bodies into pretty much any shape and were generally much more flexible and free-form than a chest-bound mimic.

A *queen* slime would logically be a tougher, more advanced version, and if the name was any indication they would also be capable of reproduction. Not that Boxxy had any interest in *that* particular biological function, though. At least, not while it was still a mimic, but there was no telling what weird new instincts the metamorphosis might instill. That aside, it had very little idea what this 'doppelganger' thing even was.

Thankfully, a quick mental poke at each of its options showed a detailed list of what each path would entail.

[Doppelganger]

Additional Requirements: Biomass Level 5

[Effects]

Species will become Doppelganger (K4ȉi%le>).

The Doppelganger Job will be awarded at Level 1 and will become the Main Job.

The Level Cap on the Biomass Skill will be increased by 5.

The Level Cap on the Shapeshift Skill will be increased by 5.

All Attributes +10.

[Queen Metal Slime]

Additional Requirements: Metal Mimicry Level 5

[Effects]

Species will become Queen Slime (Metal).

The Queen Slime Job will be awarded at Level 1 and will become the Main Job.

The Metal Mimicry Skill will no longer consume MP.

The Level Cap on the Metal Mimicry Skill will be increased by 5.

All Attributes +5. STR +10. END +10.

[Queen Shadow Slime]

Additional Requirements: Excessive exposure to darkness magic

[Effects]

Species will become Queen Slime (Shadow).

The Queen Slime Job will be awarded at Level 1 and will become the Main Job.

The Darkness Affinity Skill will be awarded at Level 1.

The Level Cap on the Ruin Mastery Skill will be increased by 5.

All Attributes +5. INT +10. WIS +10.

The two slime variants seemed obvious enough. Metallic slime bodies would most likely be some type of liquid metal and would undoubtedly be quite durable. Normal slimes were already highly resistant to physical attacks, so this specialised version should be practically invulnerable to everything but magic. The fact that its Metal Mimicry would be upgraded as well was also awfully enticing. Raising that all the way to Level 15 would likely allow Boxxy to morph its body into a wide range of weapons and armour, making it an even deadlier melee combatant.

Shadow slimes, on the other hand, appeared to be more proficient in magic than martial combat. It would appear this variant had been made available thanks to the Mimic's experience as a Warlock. The listed Darkness Affinity Skill would render Boxxy completely invulnerable to harm from darkness-attuned Spells while also empowering its own shadow magic. This would not only increase both its offensive and defensive capabilities, but also allow for some interesting strategies. It could coil itself around an opponent and rip them to shreds with a point-blank barrage of Big Bang Balls while it itself remained unhurt. And even if there was some damage from the aftershock or whatever, it would be nothing that its Mend Flesh Skill couldn't handle.

But would that regenerative ability even work on a body composed almost entirely of liquids? That was an extremely dubious point since a Monster Job and its related Skills were very closely tied to its corresponding species. Then again, Nasty was a lich and she could phase through solid objects, which Valeria had testified was a leftover from her previous species as a spectral banshee. She was still able to use the Skill, it just demanded a lot more MP in order to function.

If Boxxy took the lich's case as an example, then it was highly likely that Mend Flesh would still work, but with some kind of penalty like increased MP cost or reduced healing speed. There was also a chance that it wouldn't suffer any loss in effectiveness or efficiency at all, as the slime's liquid body would technically be the monster's flesh.

Yet even though the Mimic could make educated guesses about either slime variant, it knew next to nothing about its final option. It had never even heard of doppelgangers, though it had made a point of collecting as much information as it could regarding other monsters during its time in Erosa.

It attempted to inspect the species name to learn more about it, but its lack of knowledge on the matter meant that the listed traits appeared as incomprehensible gibberish. Like the time when it had first received its Acid Spray Skill, this was completely beyond the Mimic's understanding. The Status screen was a handy thing, but even it couldn't reveal information so completely foreign to the user that not even the doppelganger's variant was legible in the Rank Up screen.

However, there were at least some things that it could deduce from the information said screen had already provided. For one thing, the doppelganger species seemed extremely proficient in both Biomass and Shapeshift, so they had to be a type of flesh-based monsters with a shapeshifting ability superior to that of mimics. The increase in maximum Shapeshift Level in particular would be extremely tasty, since advancing the Level of the Skill beyond 10 would greatly benefit Cadaver Absorption and Mend Flesh, two of Boxxy's strongest Skills. The former would absorb additional Attributes or Levels whenever it succeeded, while the latter would gain a noticeable increase in MP efficiency.

Putting its thoughts in order, the Mimic considered each of its choices. Should it evolve into an even more versatile shapeshifter as a doppelganger? Or perhaps the close combat specialist of a queen metal

slime? The magically-oriented shadow slime variant could not be easily dismissed, either.

Each option seemed as though it would reinforce a different strength, but it was wary of making a mistake based solely on educated guesses and assumptions. Its theories had been born from experience and knowledge, true, but they were still conjectures which could easily prove incorrect. And while it was in no particular rush right now, the threat of the man Edward still loomed over it like a dark cloud. Boxxy would need to choose, and soon.

The Mimic thought long and hard while its minions waited with bated breath for the Rank Up process to start. This was the most important decision it had ever had to make in its life, and it needed to consider it carefully. Ultimately however, a decision was made, and an option was picked.

"I will be Ranking Up now," it declared. "You all are to defend me at all costs!"

"Yes, Master!"

"You got it, boss!"

"Of course, darling!"

"You can count on me, Boxxy!"

"Arms and Snack – I forbid you from having any sex," it ordered.

"Whaaaat?!"

Kora let out a strange, high-pitched scream as her face contorted with shock. She had clearly been looking forward to tapping that tight succubus ass morning and night, yet had been banned from doing so before she'd even gotten started. It was as though the Mimic had stolen her sweet roll, eaten it, pooped it back out and then smeared the poop all over the new sweet roll she'd had to get when the first one had disappeared. And then it had stolen *that* one, too.

"Understood, Master."

Xera was much less disappointed than the sex-hungry fiend, to say the least. While it was true that she would sometimes shirk her guard duty to 'take it up the old dirt road,' as it were, this was different. Her beloved master would be left completely defenceless for days on end, and she had a solemn duty to carry out. To say that she was brimming with motivation would be massively understating matters. After all, the succubus's desire to protect her master went well beyond orders or contracts. It was personal.

Boxxy did a few final checks, making sure everything was in order, then said the last words that it would ever speak as a mimic.

"Then I leave Snack in charge. See you when I wake up."

It at last finalised its choice, going completely and utterly still.

"Is… did it start?" Fizzy asked, staring curiously.

SNAP

"Gah!" she screamed.

A noise like a twig snapping in half came from the creature currently sitting in the shape of a perfectly unassuming wooden chest, catching her off guard.

"I would think so, yes," Xera noted with a bemused expression. "Now then, to our posts! We have a master to defend!"

"Ah hah," chuckled Valeria. "Good luck with that."

The lich turned transparent, rushing directly at the unconscious mimic. Her ethereal body glowed bright green as she disappeared somewhere inside the wooden box before either the golem or the two demons could react.

"What… just happened?" Fizzy asked, puzzled.

"I do believe our resident dead girl," the succubus said in a surprisingly calm tone, "is currently trying to possess Master."

Part Five

Valeria found herself in a strange, grey-coloured space. The ground upon which she was standing was composed of countless varying cubic shapes. Some were as small as rice grains while others were the size of buildings, with the majority appearing to be about half a metre on all sides. They rose and fell into and out of the ground all on their own, a few flying off into the distance while others came down from nowhere to take their places, slotting themselves into the floor.

And yet, despite the size differences, everything always fit together perfectly. It was as though a gigantic block-based puzzle was busy undoing, solving, and rearranging itself all at the same time. Looking into the similarly grey sky and horizon in the distance, Valeria realised that it was all crawling and shifting. Although she couldn't be certain, she suspected that the 'sky' and 'horizon' were actually a ceiling and a wall, both of which were currently undergoing the same odd process as the floor. Which would mean that she was actually in a chamber large enough to encompass a whole city.

"Can't say that something like this was unexpected," she mused out loud, her words echoing slightly, "but this thing's mind really is bland, huh?"

Valeria had used her Possession Skill to invade Boxxy's mindscape, a sort of inner realm that all beings capable of thought possessed. Her mental avatar had assumed a form much like the lich's physical body, except slightly more transparent and significantly greener. Her appearance greatly resembled what she had looked like as a banshee, in fact, aside from the spectral shackles and chains rattling around her.

The undead woman mumbled something about 'finding the ego' as she looked around warily. In order to succeed in her possession, she had to locate and chain down the representation of Boxxy's consciousness, its inner self. Doing so would give her control of both the monster's mind and body alike. It was something she'd done several times before, though this was her first attempt at possessing a halfway intelligent creature. If experience had taught her anything, though, it was that a sleeping or otherwise unconscious mind was most vulnerable to manipulation.

"… Over there, huh?"

Valeria spotted an arch-roofed golden structure in the distance. It was the only thing of note in the endlessly boring space, so it was most likely

the place where she would find her objective. She approached it at a brisk walk, although the ever-shifting terrain slowed her progress somewhat. She couldn't understand why the place looked so bizarre, though. The other creatures that she had possessed had all had mindscapes related to something important to them. The elf she had briefly inhabited had had a mental realm composed of a cozy abode with a crackling fireplace, while the wolf-monster's mind had appeared to be a very small cave – most likely its den – with some half-eaten carcasses strewn about.

And yet the mimic's mind was nothing more than a shapeless, indeterminate mass of blocks. In some ways it made perfect sense, but in most aspects, it was completely illogical. Then again, the same could be said of Boxxy T. Morningwood as a whole. The general barrenness of its mindscape suggested that it held very little in high regard, other than the odd structure towards which Valeria was headed. She had already guessed that the massive, barn-like building must be where the Mimic had hidden away all of its precious thoughts, needs and desires. If its ego was anywhere to be found, it would be in there, probably represented by something inane like a small child or a stack of meat.

When Valeria reached the larger-than-life golden building, she realised that it had neither door nor windows. The lack of an obvious entrance was vexing, but it wouldn't be enough to stop her. After all, what sort of hostile takeover would this be if she had come completely unprepared? She thrust her ectoplasmic hands forward, intending to phase through the gilded wall in front of her, but her fingertips had barely touched the shiny surface before Boxxy's subconscious let out an overwhelming screech.

SKREEEEEOOOOOOOK

The earsplitting noise assaulted Valeria's mental avatar, forcing her to recoil away from the golden lump of thoughts.

"The fuck was that?!" she cursed in shock.

The Mimic was supposed to be completely incapacitated! Its Rank Up should have left it in a completely defenceless state, both physically and mentally. And yet somehow it had still sensed her presence and lashed out.

"Heh, of course it wouldn't be that easy."

Really though, she should have expected at least *some* resistance. After all, the Mimic was a Warlock capable of wielding Domination magic. This meant that not only did it have the Mental Fortitude (MNT) Attribute, but that it also had a lot more of it than she did. And judging from the intensity

of its subconscious reaction, Boxxy's mind would have almost certainly been able to crush her attempted possession in an instant had it been awake. Its mental strength was… surprisingly intimidating, to say the least.

However, this was also Valeria's best chance to gain back her freedom, so she couldn't give up so easily.

Despite appearances, the lich had never loved, nor even remotely liked Boxxy. As if something as superfluous as sex could overturn the grudge she held towards her murderer. The mere thought was laughable. The tentacle orgy had done nothing more than sate her unnatural lust, allowing her calm, calculating nature to resurface. *That* had been the reason for her changed appearance, not the Agent of Chaos Skill, as Boxxy had mistakenly assumed.

But while Valeria still wanted revenge on her murderer, she'd been unable to take it while her target was in a position of power over her. The awful creature had stolen her phylactery, meaning that it could snuff out her existence in an instant if she showed the slightest sign of rebellion. That was why she had silently decided to act the part of the suddenly-infatuated, madly-in-love little girl in order to gain the Mimic's trust.

As it turned out, that had been a bad move. She should have known that such a tactic would never work on an inhuman monster like Boxxy. But really, she couldn't exactly fault her past self for making that mistake. After all, not only was the Mimic surrounded by beautiful, scantily clad women, but its sexual technique was unlike anything even the undead deviant had experienced. There had been no doubt in her mind that it had been putting it to all three of its minions, especially considering how eager that succubus had been. It was the only explanation for its pointlessly-exceptional skill at intercourse.

Valeria's assumptions, however, had been completely off the mark. The only reason for Boxxy's ridiculous sexual prowess was that it had, through no desire of its own, been made witness to countless sessions of its familiars going at it. Not to mention that it possessed excellent anatomical knowledge of the human body, which translated well enough to a lich's physical form. To say that it had been a virgin at the time would technically be correct, but to claim that it was ignorant of sex would very definitely be a mistake.

But of course, Valeria couldn't have known that. She had been entirely convinced that the Mimic was a lecherous, perverted creature looking to

add yet another slut to its harem. Acting the part had seemed like a good idea at the time. How was she supposed to know that the only reason that it knew its way around a woman's body so well was because 'mimics gotta mimic?'

However, she'd already been too invested in the lie to back out by the time she'd realised her miscalculation. She couldn't have abandoned her infatuated persona without arousing suspicion, so she'd had to grin and bear it.

But it wasn't as though she hadn't benefited from her brief un-life of servitude. Not only had the Mimic scratched Valeria's itch, its guidance had resulted in her rapidly gaining quite a lot of Levels. She'd even gotten the benefit of that +10 to all Attributes from the Grand Theft Arcana Perk.

Yet while she was certainly thrilled at becoming even more powerful, none of the benefits of the agreement had been able to even slightly dissuade her from her true purpose. All undead wanted to take vengeance upon the living in one way or another, and Valeria was hardly different. The only way that she could have forgiven Boxxy for murdering her in cold blood was if it were to willingly allow her to return the favor. Of course, it would never agree to that, especially while it still held Valeria's existence in the palm of its… hand? Or was that tentacle? Tongue? Pancreas?

Confusing anatomy aside, the bottom line was that the lich had had to resort to feigning obedience until a good opportunity to enact her vengeance had presented itself.

That, however, had been easier said than done. Just calling the hateful thing 'darling' in order to maintain her cover had disgusted her so much that she would have violently vomited out her insides if her body hadn't been freed from those pesky biological functions. At the very least, the daily dose of 'shapeshifting practise' had done wonders to alleviate her stress. After all, just because she was in a shitty situation didn't mean that she couldn't enjoy the little things. It was ironic that those sessions had been the only reason she'd been able to keep her cool for as long as she had. The stupid box really was too skilled for its own good.

But the cracks in her façade had nevertheless occasionally showed. Valeria had never possessed an abundance of self-control, so she'd been bound to slip up eventually. Thankfully, her target had been preparing for a Rank Up and had managed to achieve it before she'd blown things and exposed her true intentions. She was personally familiar with the Rank Up

process, having undergone one herself a few months before. That was why she'd been certain that it would incapacitate the Mimic, leaving it vulnerable and offering the perfect chance to strike.

That said, the monstrous box had still had those leashed guard dogs at its beck and call. The fiend was a meathead around whom Valeria could run mental circles, so she'd hardly considered her a threat. The real problem had lain with the other two – the fire-spewing succubus and the pint-sized Paladin with knowledge of holy magic. The undead were weak to both of those elements, making their wielders extremely dangerous to her and her kind. She'd been confident that she could have taken either one of them in single combat, but they were sure to have attacked her together if she'd tried anything.

However, that was only if she gave them a chance to retaliate at all. All she had to do was gain control of the Mimic, order its familiars to turn that stupid golem into scrap and then forcibly dismiss the two demons. Once the nuisances had been taken care of, she could force the monster to kill itself, retrieve her phylactery from its corpse and carry on with her un-life. Ideally, she'd want to permanently keep control of its body in order to pleasure herself as often as she wanted, but Boxxy was bound to force her out eventually. Which meant that when the time came to strike, she would have to do so quickly and decisively.

And now that time, *her* time, had finally come.

Valeria's mental avatar again tried to thrust her hands into the gigantic golden wall before her. The violent screech rang out again, but this time around she was expecting it. The ghostly lich gritted her teeth and attempted to force herself inside, only for the shriek to grow more and more intense. It didn't take long before it had become unbearable, causing her to recoil once again.

"Damned monster!" she spat after her second failure. "Just how badly do you not want anyone to see what's inside there?!"

"You have no idea, honey."

The smooth, oddly melodic voice echoed around Valeria. She looked about wildly, panicking, but failed utterly to locate the source amidst the sea of wriggling grey cubes.

"Up here, idiot."

Her gaze snapped upward, her jaw dropping in shock. The mindscape's ceiling had rearranged itself into a slightly blocky version of Xera's face.

From Valeria's perspective, the demon's smugly smiling visage appeared hundreds of metres long.

"You?! How?!" the lich screamed.

"You underestimated a cerulean succubus, honey," the gigantic Xera said gleefully. "Peeking inside other people's heads while they're out cold is one of my specialties."

"But- How are you able to invade this thing's mind?! Weren't you demons forbidden from taking hostile action against your master?!"

"Oh my, invading? I would never do such a tasteless thing. Simply looking around never hurt anybody!"

Xera's cheerful tone turned deadly serious.

"Besides, I am currently following Master's orders. Which is to say I am protecting it from an upstart little cunt who doesn't know her rightful place."

"Humpf," scoffed Valeria. "You're out of your element, bitch! I'm capable of suffocating your precious master's will completely, whereas the only thing you can do is toy with dreams and memory. None of that is going to affect me!"

"See, you have a point there," Xera smirked. "Normally magical mind-fuckery does not work on the undead. However, there are ways to mind-fuck someone by proxy. Allow me to demonstrate."

The huge grey room suddenly sprang to life. Thousands of cubes flew from the walls, floor and ceiling like a swarm of giant insects. They expertly began combining into various complex shapes, cycling through a multitude of colours as they did. Valeria suddenly found herself standing on the floor of a basement. It was oddly similar to the one in the tower where she had hidden her phylactery, albeit with three major differences.

Firstly, this one was inhabited, if the well-stocked shelves and lit torches were any indication. Secondly, there were a total of three people on the scene – or at least, two people and a chest suspended inside a metal cage. And thirdly, her relatively tiny size made her feel like an ant, or maybe a mosquito. From her perspective, the cage, the chest, the grizzled old man and the woman with the black hair were all roughly the size of castles. The scene was so bizarre that the spectral lich didn't even realise that the slightly misshapen building she'd been trying to break into had disappeared.

"Let's get started, shall we?" Xera's voice washed over her. "I'm sure this one will be a lot of fun. For me, that is."

That was when the blocky scene around her began to move.

"Interesting," said the titanic old man. "Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah bring it back to headquarters blah blah blah blah blah blah details blah. Blah blah blah blah blah Arcaneum blah blah."

"What… is this?" Valeria mumbled, unable to comprehend what was happening.

The giant, man-shaped construct turned his attention to the woman standing next to him. Now that the lich was paying closer attention to the both of them, she noticed an odd discrepancy. The man's face and body were perfectly constructed and entirely lifelike, yet the woman was… not. It was as though her body were composed of large bricks rather than skin and hair, making it difficult to determine her actual features.

"Blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah blah. Zone, get rid of blah blah Jobs."

"Blah blah blah blah Warlock Job blah?"

"Blah blah. Blah blah blah memory blah. Do it blah."

The cubic woman stepped inside the cage holding the suspended chest. Numerous tentacles sprang from the Mimic and attempted to accost the woman, but to no avail. She placed a rectangular appendage that Valeria assumed was her hand onto the chest's lid and spoke three words.

"Job Removal: Warlock."

The scene turned a violent red. The entire mindscape began to vibrate, shuffling wildly as a sharp screech filled Valeria's consciousness. Next thing she knew, she was on her hands and knees, panting heavily. The room around her had returned to its neutral grey state, and the barn-sized gold building had reappeared in front of her.

"Haah, haah, haah!" she panted frantically. "What the shit was that?!"

"That was just one of my master's memories," Xera's ceiling-bound visage informed her. "Seems the associated trauma caused this particular scene to become somewhat repressed and garbled, but Boxxy remembered the pain pretty well, wouldn't you say?"

Her face turned positively melancholic as she continued to speak.

"Ah, that was a terrible moment for me as well. To be separated from Master so unjustly, it was truly a horrifying experience. That was hardly the first or the last time it had to experience such agony, though. In fact, I think I should share some more with you. Here, how about… this one!"

The lich was then forced through an extremely detailed recollection of Boxxy battling the fleshmaiden roughly two months ago. Intense pain reverberated through the room every time the yet-unnamed-mimic received a wound from the agile monster. The final Spell it threw at her using all of its MP carried such a feeling of exhaustion that it was impossible for Valeria's projected self to even stand up.

"That was a good fight, wasn't it?" the succubus asked, as if narrating. "A pity that I couldn't do more, but I like to think that I helped in my own way. I was pretty instrumental to this next one though!"

Next came the memory of Boxxy holing up in the ground as the Calamity was going off in the distance. Xera perfectly relayed the feeling of the city-wide explosion washing over the creature right into Valeria, who could do little but gasp heavily under the strain. Even if it was merely remembered pain, it still felt all too real.

"Oh, I know! How about this one! It's recent so it's still fresh!"

The lich's green face paled as she recognised the scene. It had taken place less than a day before – when Boxxy had carved out its own MLG. The pain that blasted through the unfortunate lich was so thorough, so devastating that she felt as though she were going to break apart.

"Had enough yet, honey? I can re-play that one over and over as much as I want. Then again, they do say variety is the spice of life, so let's get spicy, shall we!"

The next painful memory was the one in which Boxxy had escaped from Edward's grasp by cutting away at its own flesh to free itself from the restraints, forcing Valeria to once again experience its agony as though it were her own.

"You… Haah, haah… You won't stop me so easily!" Valeria insisted. "It doesn't matter how many times you do that, you won't succeed! Torment me all you want, but you still can't force me out without a Priest ritual, and you know it!"

"Force you out? That's not what I'm doing here."

"… Huh?"

"I'm merely having a bit of fun. You know what they say, torture exists solely for the torturer's sake."

The succubus gave the lich a lecherous smile.

"Besides, I get to feel Master's painful memories too. Though not as intense as the real thing, they're nevertheless quite… mmmmmm,

exquisite!”

“So what? You plan to keep distracting me until your master wakes up? That’s a pretty pathetic strategy you have there.”

Xera’s indecent smirk became an unsettlingly evil grin.

“You know I can just crush your phylactery at any given moment, right?”

“As if! The thing is inside your master’s body! None of you lapdogs can dig it out without this fucking box’s permission! Not even that insufferable gnome-thing!”

Valeria had been there when Fizzy had made the Pledge of Arms, and she felt quite certain that ripping open Boxxy’s body to retrieve the item in question would warrant some kind of ‘divine retribution.’

“See, that’s where you’re wrong, honey,” Xera gloated. “Master doesn’t have your precious gilded egg. I do.”

“Yeah right! Nice bluff! You think I wouldn’t notice if you were carrying around something like that?!”

“I knew you would. Just like I knew you’d try something fishy during the Rank Up, which is why I made some arrangements. Here, let me show you.”

The Mimic’s mindscape warped once more, this time into a scene inside the ruined hedge maze within the Spire of the Jade King, with Boxxy and Xera standing opposite each other.

“Master, I think you should let me hang onto Nasty’s phylactery,” the latter stated.

“Why?” the Mimic inquired.

“It might break if you keep it inside your body while it’s undergoing such massive changes. We wouldn’t want that, right?”

“That’s a good point. Here, take it.”

Boxxy removed the gilded phylactery from its maw and handed it to Xera. However, she didn’t accept it, not right away.

“Master, I will need your assistance in order to hide it from her. She might get some weird ideas if she sees me carrying it around.”

“I see. Then the usual place?”

“Yes, please!”

Xera turned and knelt down on the ground, presenting her plump ass to the Mimic. Her versatile spaded tail shifted her lower garment aside to expose her nether regions and back door to the cool night air. Boxxy

proceeded to roughly shove the phylactery into the succubus's rear entrance. The demoness moaned and squealed with pleasure as her rectum distended to truly inhuman size in order to accommodate the egg-shaped object, which must have been at least ten centimetres wide.

Valeria watched in abject horror as her soul's vessel was used as an oversized butt-plug. The memory's viewpoint was positioned such a way that she had a front row seat to the show, too. Once the last of the priceless object had disappeared somewhere inside Xera's bowels, the succubus looked over her shoulder, her face twisted in pleasure.

"Thanksh, Mashteeer!" she slurred. "You're the beeeesht!"

The scene faded away into blank grey nothing a few seconds later.

"Do you understand now?" Xera spoke coldly. "Your ugly little soul is currently lodged firmly in my shit-chute. Right. Where. It. Be. Longs."

"You… sick, twisted, evil, conniving bitch!" Valeria flew into a rage.

"Flattery will get you nowhere, honey. Or should I say, *darling*? Ah-hahahahaha!"

The lich fell to her knees in defeat. Her little rebellion had been over before it had even begun.

"In any event," Xera continued, "I think I've had enough fun for now. I should really not disturb Master's Rank Up any more. So, goodbye, Nasty thing. I'll be sure to thoroughly wipe your pitiful existence from my memory."

Her face disappeared from the ceiling. A second later, Valeria felt a sharp, yet remote pain wash over her, as though her heart were being squeezed all the way on the other side of the world. Her projected self dissipated like a puff of smoke, leaving nothing behind and finally putting an end to the existence of Valeria Vortena.

Boxxy's mindscape remained entirely undisturbed by her passing. Its many cubes continued to idly slide in and out of the walls as though nothing had happened, their owner blissfully unaware of what had just transpired. Truthfully speaking, Valeria's little coup had been doomed from the start, even without the succubus's interference. The large golden building she had tried so hard to penetrate was in fact the very thing she had been looking for. If she had seen it from a distance, or maybe even a different angle, she might have understood how truly futile her efforts were.

Because the only noticeable thing in the vapid, empty mindscape was a gigantic gilded treasure chest – the representation of Boxxy's own sense of

self-worth.

Massive, solid, unflinching, pointlessly shiny and tightly closed off.

Exactly what one would expect from a juvenile monster that would always put its own greed above everything else.

Part Six

"I'm back," Fizzy yelled while walking into the shallow cave.

"'Sup squirt?" Kora greeted her. "Got a big one this time, huh?"

The golem was dragging the body of an exceptionally large twin-tailed wolf by its broken neck, leaving a trail of fresh blood behind her.

"Yeah. Think this one was the alpha of the pack or something," she said. "What's Snack doing?"

Boxxy's other familiar was sitting next to the dormant chest several metres away at the rear of the cave. She stared intently at her slumbering master, keeping both hands on the chest's lid.

"She's checking on the boss's brains since she's worried that that undead bitch might've left something nasty behind," the fiend explained.

"But she should be gone, right? We smashed the thing that held her rotten soul and everything."

Xera had evacuated the bitch's phylactery from her bowels the instant Valeria had begun her pitiful attempt at possessing Boxxy. A succubus laying a golden egg was something neither Fizzy nor Kora had ever expected to see, yet would likely never forget. Once that particular spectacle had been over with, though, she'd hurried to her master's aid with her Dreamweaver Skill. It didn't violate the contract since, as she had stated, she was only following Boxxy's somewhat ambiguous command to protect it.

Still, the Mimic's mindscape was completely different when it was fully unconscious as opposed to simply asleep. Xera hadn't initially thought that there would be much going on inside, but even asleep the place was a turbulent, ever-changing maelstrom of fragmented thoughts and images. It was so disorienting that it had nearly made her ill, and she shuddered to think what it was like while Boxxy was awake. That was why the seemingly-unnatural calm she had seen when she'd rushed to her master's aid had taken her by surprise, though it had made sense considering the Mimic's condition.

Unconscious was not quite the same as asleep, though it still made the subject more susceptible to magical mental interference.

Xera was nevertheless thrilled to have had the opportunity to see her master's inner self when it was completely at rest. Having toyed with countless people's heads throughout her life, she couldn't help but marvel at how impressively sturdy Boxxy's chest-shaped ego was. Though at least

some of that was due to its significant MNT score, the Attribute in question could merely amplify what was already there. Painful as they had been, the Mimic's past experiences had tempered its force of will and sense of purpose to the point where its mental muscles were comparable to those of veteran adventurers.

It was almost laughable that a weak-willed brat like Valeria had thought that she had a chance of possessing Boxxy. While one could say that Xera was just as unstable as Valeria, the former was also an immortal demon with a natural aptitude for mind magic. Compared to her, the lich was essentially a petulant child, but the undead wench had been even more inferior compared to Boxxy. Even at its most vulnerable, Valeria's attempts at dominating the Mimic's inactive consciousness had been so pitiful that it had been like watching an ant try to topple a castle.

The would-be invader's efforts had been so pathetically futile that Xera hadn't been able to help toying with her. The fact that Valeria's mental projection had been affected so strongly by the Mimic's recollections had indicated that it was actually her will being dominated. All it had taken had been a gentle nudge on the succubus's part to dredge up a few unpleasant memories and Boxxy's subconscious had done the rest. And while Xera could have easily blocked those feelings out if she'd wanted, she just hadn't wanted to.

Even if it was only second-hand, experiencing her master's pain was, in essence, a form of masturbation. Not that she would outright admit to indulging in such – mostly for fear that Boxxy would forbid it. As for Valeria, she could have easily seen the lich destroyed without even bothering to interact with her, but she hadn't been able to pass up the rare opportunity to share her perversion with someone else.

And eventually she'd grown bored, and had Kora smash Valeria's phylactery to smithereens.

"I even used Consecrate on the pieces for good measure," Fizzy added.

"I know, I was there," Kora groaned in exasperation, "but the Slut-Tornado thinks a fragment of the bitch might have stuck to the boss's mind and is interfering with the Rank Up. She's just paranoid, if you ask me."

"Well, it *has* been almost five days. That's considerably more than the two or three days she said it originally took."

"Just because the boss is taking a while doesn't mean anything's wrong. Maybe it's totally normal."

Even the thick-headed fiend could recognise that growing from a lesser mimic into a greater one wouldn't be nearly the same as changing into a completely different type of monster.

"Hmm, maybe," Fizzy conceded. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see."

The golem flexed her metallic muscles and tossed the dead wolf onto the pile of corpses near the entrance. This was Boxxy's 'breakfast,' a tribute to the Hero of Chaos by its first loyal follower. Fizzy had heard that the Mimic had woken up absolutely ravenous the last time it had undergone a Rank Up, so she'd taken it upon herself to stockpile enough meat to satiate its needs.

She had gone into the nearby woods and started pummelling every living thing that looked as though it might make a good meal for a hungry ex-mimic. Something which she could afford to do because the fiend and the succubus were more than enough to ward off any random monsters that the Sawblade Mountains might have thrown at them.

That said, she had still made a point not to stray too far from 'base' just in case something serious went down, so her body count was not nearly as impressive as it could have been. Nevertheless, she might have gone a *bit* overboard dragging over thirty carcasses back to the cave… but she was getting Metal Golem Levels along the way, so there was really no reason to hold back.

Unfortunately, it would seem that Kora didn't share her point of view.

"By the way, aren't you gonna clean up some of the older bodies in there?" the fiend complained. "They're starting to smell worse than a ghoul's rotten asshole."

"Whaaaat? When did that happen?!" Fizzy responded in mock surprise.

"It's been three days! In the summer! Living things tend to rot under these conditions!"

"Ah, something like that. I see, I see, so that's how it is. Sounds really bothersome."

"Stop nodding to yourself and fucking do something about it!"

"Why should I?" Fizzy shrugged. "This is a meatbag problem, it has nothing to do with me."

"Well, I'd love to do something but I can't carry them far enough away from the cave because I have to stand by the boss's side!"

"Still failing to see how this is any of my concern."

“Why you little-!”

“Will you two stop flirting?!” Xera shouted.

“Who the fuck is flirting?!” the other two answered in unison.

“Just shut up and get over here! I think Master is waking up!”

Kora and Fizzy immediately stopped their bickering and dashed over to see what Xera was on about. Looking at the state of the wooden chest made the ex-gnome realise why the succubus had suddenly grown so worried. Though it had looked fine when she’d left for her hunting trip about an hour ago, the Mimic’s chest-shaped shell had become thoroughly… rotten, for lack of a better word. The polished wood-like surface had grown splintery and pitch-black, and looked as though it would crumble apart at the lightest touch. It was almost as if the creature had contracted some kind of flesh-eating disease even nastier than the Blight.

A series of loud snapping noises came from the frayed wooden chest. Xera jerked back in surprise, backing warily away from the monster. The rotting faux-wood surface suddenly fell apart and collapsed into a ring of formless, dead flesh.

Inside was a small blob of viscous, pitch-black jelly. A pair of round yellow eyes stared up from its surface, reflecting the sparse light pouring in from outside. The reflective amber orbs darted wildly between Xera, Kora and Fizzy, seemingly at random.

“… Master?”

The monster stared back at the succubus maliciously, like a predator sizing up its next meal. Its yellow eyes shifted again before it could pounce, this time settling on the corpse pile that Fizzy had prepared. A few tense moments later, the glob of slime exploded as something smaller than even Fizzy leapt out and buried itself into the mountain of decaying flesh.

HROMP CRUMP HRUMF MUNCH SQUISH

An orchestra of thoroughly disgusting noises came from the massive mound of flesh, bone and fur, which was rapidly decreasing in volume with each stomach-churning verse.

“Holy shit! Look at it go!”

Kora cheered at the carnage unfolding before her. Boxxy’s feeding frenzy had proven much more violent than she’d thought it would be. Then again, this was the first time that she’d seen her master turn borderline feral from hunger.

Fizzy, on the other hand, was struck speechless. She had honestly expected the meat she'd gathered to last a few days, at the very least, yet the rate at which it was disappearing made her doubt whether it would even be enough for 'breakfast.'

"Masteeer! This is so not fair!" Xera whined. "You should've eaten me first!"

A trio of dark-coloured tendrils shot out from somewhere deep within the pile of mangled bodies, wrapped around the succubus and pulled her straight into the bloodied mess. Her screams lasted for only a few seconds before she went completely silent.

"Hey, Kora? Was that okay?" Fizzy asked.

"Well… I mean she got what she wanted… So, it's probably fine?"

"I thought Boxxy couldn't get nutrition from you guys."

"Yeah, that's right. Doesn't mean it can't use us as seasoning, though. I doubt that rotten meat tastes very good."

"I see…"

"By the way, did you get a good look at what the boss looked like?"

Fizzy shook her head.

"Not really. It zoomed right past my head before I even realised. I couldn't track it with my eyes at all."

"Yeah, same here…"

The remaining two stared with a mixture of amazement and morbid curiosity as a veritable storm of gnashing, ripping and slurping swept up every last corpse that Fizzy had brought. Only trace amounts of blood were left on the floor by the time the ex-mimic had finished.

[Proficiency level increased. Biomass is now Level 10. All Attributes +1.]

[Your hunger has been sated. Automatic HP and MP recovery will return to normal.]

"Boxxy?" Fizzy called out.

The small humanoid figure stopped licking the floor, stood and turned to face her. It looked like a slightly malnourished child around eight or nine years old. Although it had appeared to be shorter than Fizzy when it had erupted from the black goop, it had rapidly grown to about one hundred and thirty centimetres in height. Its skin was a wrinkled mass of grey flesh that seemed to undulate all on its own, with gangly, fragile-looking arms and legs. The feet had three short toes in front and a fourth poking out of the heel, almost like a bird's, while the hands had only three fingers each. Then

again, the number of digits was probably irrelevant considering that a shapeshifter could have as many of those as it wanted.

The head was perhaps the most bizarre aspect of the creature. It was a bit longer and wider towards the top when compared to a human's, with a pointy chin that made it look like an upside-down pear. The gaunt cheeks combined with the shape of the jaw gave the lower half of its face a distinctly triangular shape – assuming that it could even really be called a face. There was no nose, mouth, ears, nor any other discernible features other than those circular yellow eyes, but even those seemed as though they'd been glued atop a perfectly smooth mask.

"What is it, Fizzy?"

A voice with no apparent source emanated from the creature, so quiet that it was almost a whisper.

"You, uh, missed a spot."

The golem pointed to the severed boar leg that had been ejected from the corpse pile during the feeding frenzy, which landed several metres from the carnage. Boxxy looked at it and its eyes lit up. Its featureless face split open vertically, almost like a book, revealing an enormous maw lined with countless needle-like teeth. A long red tongue shot out and wrapped itself around the last morsel like a whip, dragging the last of the meat pile into the seemingly-bottomless pit of Boxxy's stomach.

Some loud chewing and an audible swallow later, the monster let out a satisfied burp at the filling, if not precisely satisfying, meal.

"So, boss," Kora said awkwardly, "I take it you're a dopplegangster now?"

"Doppel*ganger*," it corrected her.

[Rank up complete.]

[Congratulations! Your species has become Doppelganger (Juvenile).]

[All Attributes +10.]

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 1 Doppelganger! All Attributes +2.]

[The Doppelganger Job is now your Main Job.]

[The maximum Level of your Shapeshift Skill has increased to 15.]

[The maximum Level of your Biomass Skill has increased to 15.]

The series of notifications had been the first thing that Boxxy had perceived upon waking up, but it had put off dealing with them due to the overpowering hunger. The former mimic and current doppelganger had

never, ever felt such ravenous starvation before. It would have liked to express its gratitude towards Fizzy for preparing its massive breakfast ahead of time, but it wasn't sure how to go about it. She took pride in her appearance, so perhaps offering her a spit-shine was the way to go?

"You know, I honestly thought you'd gone for one of the slimes," the fiend admitted. "It certainly looked like it with all that gunk stuck to you."

"Idiot," Boxxy reprimanded her. "I already told you that that would ruin my plans."

Number one priority on the monster's to-do list was to integrate itself into enlightened society, which it wouldn't be able to do unless it could mask its appearance. It was questionable whether a queen slime's gelatinous body could be molded to appear like skin, and the possibility of losing its Mend Flesh was too big a risk to take. It had gone with the safest route and picked the option that looked to specialise in sculpting its own flesh. Granted, it had been an educated guess and something of a shot in the dark, but in the end, everything had worked out splendidly.

Unfortunately, while Boxxy had indubitably become exactly what it had wanted to, it was already feeling nostalgic for its old body for a number of immediately apparent reasons.

"How come you're so tiny, though?" Kora asked, pointing out the most glaring problem.

"Because this body is still young," Boxxy replied calmly. "I have to grow into it."

"So, uh… what exactly did you do with all that damn meat? There must've been, like, ten tons of it!"

A gross exaggeration on the fiend's part, but her curiosity was nevertheless perfectly valid.

"It's all right here," the shapeshifter replied, patting its chest.

"You packed all of that away inside that tiny body?"

"Yes."

"How?!"

"Because I'm a doppelganger."

"… Don't take this the wrong way, boss, but your anatomy is making less sense by the day."

Yet, as ridiculous as it seemed at first, in the grand scheme of things Boxxy's answer was perfectly sensible.

[Doppelganger (Species)]

Extremely versatile and nearly extinct, doppelgangers are a breed of shapeshifting monsters that prefer humanoid shapes. Their flesh is incredibly dense when compared to that of most other creatures, allowing them to gain body mass several times heavier than their slender frames would suggest. This concentrated muscle and tissue can be expanded to adopt a shape much larger than the original, allowing them to easily pass as any member of another human-sized species. Their weak point is the spine, which holds their brain tissue, and, while flexible, remains the only part of them that cannot be shapeshifted.

Doppelgangers cannot breed amongst themselves and reproduce by hijacking the pregnancy of a female mammal, usually of an enlightened species. This is typically accomplished by masquerading as the female's mate and infecting the unborn foetus with its parasitic larva. By the time the infant is born, it will have bonded with the larva to such a degree as to make removal impossible without killing the host. The child is unaware of the parasite's presence, which will gradually replace the host's body with its own over the next four to six years until nothing of the original is left.

Doppelgangers come in two main variants – Juvenile and Adult. Their natural strength, agility and shapeshifting prowess increase significantly as their bodies mature, though the flexible nature of their flesh makes them susceptible to unexpected mutation. Doppelgangers also possess above-average psychic potential, with all fully-fledged adults having access to some form of telekinesis.

That was the short essay Boxxy would have seen had it bothered to inspect its newly acquired species' Status screen. It didn't need to, though. The necessary knowledge of its new body had been bestowed upon it during the Rank Up process. Unlike Fizzy, who had become a monster due to a curse augmented by a Hero Skill, the shapeshifter had literally been reborn as a doppelganger. Its body already felt utterly its own, with none of the bizarre difficulties that the golem had faced. Valeria may have had a similar experience to the Paladin's, though, considering that her transition from banshee to lich had been accomplished through similar means.

Speaking of…

"Hmm? Where's Nasty?"

"She tried to betray you, so we broke her stupid egg and killed her," Kora reported. "Or did we 're-kill' her? Un-undead her? Yeah, we un-undeaded her."

“I see. That’s too bad.”

“What, really?!” Fizzy was aghast. “You actually feel sorry for that contemptible whore?!”

“No. I just wanted to keep the shiny egg.”

“Oh.”

“Anything left of it?” Boxxy asked hopefully.

“No. The fragments were consecrated and burned to ash. Snack wanted to be extra careful, and I agreed, so we made sure to annihilate it as thoroughly as possible.”

“Arms, is this true?”

“Yeah, it is. Bubble-butt’s the one that told us to smash it in the first place.”

“I see. Can’t be helped then. Oh, that’s right!”

Boxxy had just realised: it had eaten Xera during its earlier feeding frenzy. While decaying flesh could still provide it with nutrients, it tasted horrible, so it had almost unthinkingly added a tasty Snack to its meal. Just to spice things up a bit, just as the fiend had guessed earlier. She hadn’t been as much as help as Boxxy would have liked, but it had still been better than nothing. Regardless, that was over now, so it proceeded to re-summon the succubus, who greeted the creature enthusiastically the moment she appeared.

“Congratulations on your Rank Up, Master,” she said, her smile wide and blissful.

Her beloved master was alive and healthy and she had gotten to enjoy servicing it in her capacity as a Snack. Therefore, she really had no complaints about the situation. Well, except one.

“Excuse me, Master, but are you well?”

“I am. Why?”

“Because you’re curled up on the floor…”

“Yeah,” Fizzy chimed in. “You remind me of my old, worthless self when you do that.”

“… I miss being a chest,” Boxxy admitted.

This was the real problem with its new species. The former mimic felt vulnerable and exposed now that its faux-wood shell was gone. Just because this was its own body didn’t automatically mean that it felt entirely comfortable in it. While it was now a completely different species, the four months and 50 Levels of its Mimic Job were still influencing its behaviour a

good deal. Its desire to eat tasty things and hoard shinies hadn't changed in the slightest, nor had the instincts telling it to hide patiently in the corner and wait for lunch to come to it.

In short, on every level except the physical, Boxxy still felt like a sentient treasure chest.

"But… you're this master shapeshifter or something now, right?" Fizzy inquired.

"Yes."

"So… can't you like, I don't know, become a chest if you wanted to?"

"… Ah!"

Of course, why hadn't it thought of that sooner! It grew a thick slab of flesh from its back, which wrapped itself around the misshapen-headed child. It rapidly expanded, becoming an arch-lidded rectangle, and within seconds the Mimic's original chesty visage had returned to its former glory. It hurriedly grew a new MLG, placing in the exact same spot the old had been, then opened its lid to reveal numerous dagger-like teeth and a long, fleshy tongue, ready to devour unwitting adventurers on the spot. Boxxy even sprouted the same set of eight spider legs and single cat-like eye at its front that it had grown accustomed to.

"Much better!"

The relief in its voice, which had reverted to its previous monstrous timbre, was unmistakable. If there was one thing in the world that Boxxy T. Morningwood could be said to love, it was being a large chest.

"A shame," muttered Xera. "I thought Master's childish form was adorable. Then again, being devoured by a grey-skinned child doesn't have quite the same visceral impact as being ripped limb from limb by its massive teeth. Ah, but if only *that* part was eaten then maybe-"

Fizzy stared, wide-eyed, as the succubus kept mumbling about how much she was looking forward to being devoured in new, exciting ways.

"She really is fucked in the head, isn't she?" she whispered to Kora.

It wasn't as though the past week hadn't left her well aware of the succubus's perversions, but she'd had no idea just how deep the rotten rabbit hole went. It had gone way beyond a simple hobby at this point.

"Like you wouldn't believe," the fiend answered. "I mean, I'd tell you to watch out so you don't become a hopeless pervert like her, but it's probably too late for that."

"Huh? What's that supposed to mean?!"

“Fizzy.”

“Yes, Boxxy, what is it?”

The golem’s misgivings were forgotten instantly when she realised that Boxxy had come up next to her.

“You’re not shiny. Why is that?”

“Oh, right. About that…”

Her previously spotless steel frame was covered in dried blood and bile from all the monsters she had been killing, and her clothes hadn’t fared much better. The splatter was particularly gruesome on her shield-bearing side since she *may* have used Armoured Charge a bit too much. And how could she have known that deer would squirt so much blood at once? Then again, smashing their heads against the ground like rotten tomatoes had probably been unnecessary.

“I’ve been so busy hunting that I didn’t have the chance to wash off all the blood in between kills,” Fizzy explained sheepishly. “Next thing I knew I was completely covered in crusty stuff, but I didn’t have anything on hand to clean it off.”

“Shall I clean you as payback for the meal?”

“You can do that?! I mean, yes, please!”

The Mimic – or rather, the doppelganger pretending to be a mimic – opened its maw and coiled its tongue around the golem. She didn’t even have time to gasp before she was dragged into its mouth, despite her disproportionately heavy weight. The ease with which it manhandled the gnome-sized lump of steel spoke volumes to the capability of its new extra-dense muscles. Boxxy proceeded to roll Fizzy around inside its mouth for roughly thirty seconds, then opened its maw and placed her gently back on the ground.

The golem’s eyes widened in shock as she stared at her drool-covered palms, barely able to process what she had just experienced. Boxxy had caressed every nook and cranny of her body with dozens of tiny tongue-tentacles, scrubbing places and gaps that even she hadn’t been aware of. It had slobbered all over her fingers, inside her mouth, around her entirely decorative genitals and even between her butt cheeks. Not a single spot of her body had been left untouched.

And yet, she didn’t feel disgusted, violated or even appalled by the borderline-obscene act.

“Ohhh! I’m practically sparkling!”

She felt ecstatic.

"I look better than I did the day I was born! You even managed to scrub most of the blood out of my outfit! Thanks a bunch, Boxxy! I really needed that!"

"You're welcome," the monster replied in good humor.

Though rewarding Fizzy for her service had been the shapeshifter's primary motivation, it had also wanted to see just how brightly it could make her steel frame shine. The results were still a bit lackluster, but her spotless skin was still reflective enough to be shiny in its own right. Besides, the dried filth on her body had turned out to be surprisingly tasty, so it had enjoyed the act quite a bit more than it had expected to.

"I rest my case."

Kora couldn't help but mumble to herself in exasperation. How was it that she, a literal demon rapist, was somehow the *least* sexually deviant of Boxxy's minions?

"So, what now, Master?" Xera asked, once she had recovered from her fantasies.

"Now, we head north," Boxxy answered. "We still have to complete Operation: TASTYCOCK."

[General Information]

Boxxy T. Morningwood
Doppelganger (Juvenile), 5 months old
Level 1.00 Doppelganger
Level 50.00 Mimic (MAX)
Level 25.00 Warlock (MAX)
Level 12.88 Artificer
2401/2401 HP (+8.4/sec)
1715/1715 MP (+2.6/sec)

[Attributes]

STR 266, DEX 305, AGI 284, END 427, INT 343, WIS 267, LCK 142, MNT 211, CHR 121, PER 114

[Mimic Skills]

Assassination – Lvl 9.64
Storage – Lvl 9.41
Cadaver Absorption – Lvl 7.55
Biomass – Lvl 10.08
Natural Armor – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)

Metal Mimicry – Lvl 8.23
Mend Flesh – Lvl 7.64
Adaptive Defense – Lvl 3.31
[Absorbed Skills]
Acid Spray – Lvl 9.45
[Warlock Skills]
Summon Familiar – Lvl 9.72
Power Overwhelming – Lvl 8.46
Demonology – Lvl 6.38
Crystallise Magic – Lvl 7.28
[Artificer Skills]
Clockwork Expertise – Lvl 4.04
Explosives Handling – Lvl 2.10
[Hero Skills]
Chaotic Disposition – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
Agent of Chaos – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
Essence Concealment – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift – Lvl 10.18
Stealth – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Lockpick – Lvl 1.25
Sword Mastery – Lvl 7.53
Projectile Mastery – Lvl 7.21
Dagger Mastery – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Ruin Mastery – Lvl 9.42
Domination Mastery – Lvl 6.88
Shield Mastery – Lvl 6.51

Interlude
A Neighborly Chat

The Aether. A plane of reality that existed alongside the mortal world, although not exactly parallel to it. ‘Perpendicular’ would probably be closest if it were necessary to use a geometric relation. The Aether was the home of the gods and goddesses which presided over the physical realm of Terrania. However, rather than a single space housing every divine being in existence, it was actually closer to a collection of small worlds. Each deity had their own Divine Area, their own pocket of reality over which they had absolute authority. It would be more accurate to describe the Aether as a ‘divine neighbourhood’ rather than ‘the realm of the gods.’

It was one such Divine Area that belonged to the God of Chaos. The seemingly-infinite white space was currently occupied by two large objects of note. A large red sofa upon which the god himself was seated, and a gigantic wooden frame which floated in mid-air before the comfortably-cushioned couch. The frame relayed images and audio of one Boxxy T. Morningwood as the God of Chaos watched avidly, a box of popcorn in hand.

The god in question had chosen his Hero of Chaos entirely for its entertainment value, and indeed, observing the former Mimic had become his favorite pastime. He had analysed the creature to determine the innumerable ways by which its fragile existence could come to an end, and yet every other week new possibilities seemed to crop up.

To say that he found Boxxy interesting would be a gross understatement.

“-complete Operation: TASTYCOCK,” the monster’s voice blared from the screen.

“Hah!” the entity chuckled. “Gets me every time.”

He grabbed a wad of popcorn and stuffed it into his mouth, munching delightedly as he mulled over Boxxy’s current situation.

“Kind of a shame it went for doppelganger,” he mused aloud, “but I suppose I can’t expect it to do the unexpected *every* opportunity. Otherwise it wouldn’t be ‘unexpected,’ now, would it?”

The god had been hoping that its Hero would opt for one of the queen slime options for its Rank Up, unlikely though that had been. Looking at all

the variables, there had been an overwhelming ninety-six percent chance that it would choose doppelganger, which was why the deity sounded a bit disapproving of that outcome. Still, he had high hopes for the future. Boxxy had already surprised the god numerous times, and he absolutely loved surprises.

He had especially enjoyed watching the gnome abandon her flesh to become a steel golem thanks entirely to the monster's bumbling, unthinking actions. Most surprisingly of all was how, despite all the abuse and suffering that it had put her through, she had somehow ended up wholeheartedly supporting the creature that single-handedly ruined her life. That had been far more exciting than the mundane future in which she was eaten before the then-mimic had even made it back to civilisation.

The God of Chaos had to admit that his latest Hero was shaping up to be far more competent than that lizard guy he'd forced the title on last time.

KA-KLINK

A loud sound, like glass breaking, echoed through the Divine Area. A spiderweb of cracks appeared in the air directly in front of the God of Chaos, as though the fabric of reality itself had broken. The deity sighed dejectedly, devoured another helping of popcorn and heaved himself off the couch. Standing before the cracks, he snapped his fingers.

The fractured space expanded in an instant to form a rectangular hole in reality, a gateway into another God's Divine Area. The 'room' beyond this doorway was a well-lit cavern so enormous that it was as though a mountain had been hollowed out and turned into a museum. A marvelous collection of countless statues, paintings, weapons, furniture, armour, vials of potions, and numerous other products and works of art had all been put on display. While some works lined the walls and still others stood on pedestals or inside glass display cases, the vast majority had simply been suspended in mid-air. All in all, the Divine Area exuded much more life and character than the sterile, endless white of the one to which it was connected.

Standing directly between the two dimensions was a collection of rocks and stones bound by some invisible force into the shape of a stocky man. As one might expect, the visitor inhabited the lavishly decorated space beyond the spatial doorway. He was the deity whose domain encompassed the act of creation by the skilled hands of artists and artisans, a being which valued honest, hard work and exquisite craftsmanship above all else.

“Ah, Goroth,” Jimmy said, casually. “I’d call this a pleasant surprise, but then I’d be lying.”

The God of Randomness looked down at what had once been a box of popcorn with a sour kettle on his glove. The tasty snack was now a cup of eels, which he had no desire to partake in. This sort of thing happened every time he had company, which was why he hated entertaining guests unless it was absolutely necessary. He irritably tossed the jar of crickets somewhere behind the sofa and turned his attention back to the other deity.

“So! To what do I owe the… pleasure?”

“I must have words with you, Deacon.”

The Earth God spoke in a dull, rumbling voice. It was so predictably fitting that it made Charlie just a little more annoyed every time he heard it.

“… Well?” asked the pile of rocks. “Aren’t you going to invite me in?”

“Ah, right. Do come in! Have a seat! Take a load off! Please, do tell me why you insisted on *SLAMMING ON MY FUCKING DOORBELL* on this fine day.”

“Easy there, Michael,” Goroth cautioned, stepping over the threshold. “That is no way to talk to your betters.”

Yeah, right, Jimmy scoffed internally. *‘Betters.’*

It was a little-known fact that the world’s deities did not exactly get along with one another. Most of them were locked in an inter-religious competition, a celestial game of politics and intrigue to see which of them could obtain the most followers and thereby gain the most influence.

From Riddick’s point of view, it was more akin to a pointless faith-measuring contest than a power struggle, and either way he wanted no part in it. He found the whole concept mind-numbingly inane, so to the best of his ability he preferred to stay out of it. Which was why his followers were so disorganised, more like a cult than a proper religion. This left Cedric as the eternal rock bottom of the celestial scoreboard, by far the most obscure member of Terrania’s pantheon.

However, irksome though her fellow deities’ contempt may have been, Melanie tried her best not to let their holier-than-thou attitude get to her.

“Of course, do forgive me, old boy!” she said with mock politeness. “Honestly, where are my manners? Ah, probably all over the floor behind the sofa…”

She wasn’t very good at it.

“Anyway! Do come in and have a seat, won’t you?” Neal beckoned with a wave of his bucket and a bow of his anvil.

“Much obliged.”

The rock pile deposited itself onto the couch, which creaked dangerously under the weight. Kelly similarly sat his fingertips next to him, forcing a smile onto his fishbowl.

“Now then, what can I do you for, Goroth?”

“Funny thing, actually. I was watching over this cultural festival a bunch of dwarves were holding in my honor. Lots of dancing, mountains of good food, an unhealthy amount of alcohol, a general sense of nothing getting done… You know how it is.”

“No, I really don’t.”

Goroth magnanimously ignored the sarcastic comment and continued.

“So that’s been going on for a few weeks now. And when it ended I went to check on my stuff and noticed that one of my dungeons – the Spire of the Jade King – was effectively missing. Any idea what might’ve caused that?”

“Dunno,” Ralph shrugged his dinner plates. “These things just happen, I guess.”

“Really? They ‘just happen,’ do they?”

“That’s what I said, isn’t it?”

“Uh-huh. So, you’re telling me it had nothing to do with the fact that your new Hero ‘just happened’ to stride into my dungeon and ‘just happened’ to decimate it in a matter of hours? All while I ‘just happened’ to be otherwise occupied?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“Come off it, Martha!” Goroth raised his voice. “I know you’re somehow responsible for this!”

“I most certainly am not. I swear to you that I in no way told my new chosen one to wreck your Spire thingy just to spite you.”

“Maybe not explicitly, but I know you had a hand in it!”

Geneva sighed. That sort of mentality was part of the reason why the God of Probability had so few followers in the first place. Mortals had this bad habit of blaming him for every single bad thing that happened to them. Got mugged in an alley? His fault. Caught a debilitating flesh-eating disease that made their ears fall off? Her fault. Got stabbed in the face by their wife for cheating on her? Clearly Timothy’s fault!

And yet they never once thanked her for all the good things that happened to them. Like how they weren't axed to death when they were mugged or managed to survive a stab wound to the face from their jealous spouse. Admittedly, those may have been examples of bad things not getting worse, but they were still favourable outcomes, from Billy's perspective.

At least the Champion of Chaos he had created knew what was up and where she stood. No matter what, Fizzy had done her best to send a fervent prayer to him on a daily basis, expressing her sincere gratitude for his help. Whether it was for his having saved her from a life of dull obscurity or the fact that the sun hadn't exploded and wiped out all life on the planet, the golem's positively-charged thoughts were always most welcome.

Hers weren't the only ones, either. Through one circumstance or another, most of the Paladins, Priests and Monks in Patrick's service shared her devotion, sometimes to a fanatical degree. And Wilgarbanding always listened, paying special attention to each and every one of them. The personal touch would have been impossible with a massive following like Goroth's, but the Goddess of Dice Rolls honestly preferred it this way.

Even if this quality-over-quantity approach didn't exactly give him a whole lot of divine power with which to perform miracles and blessings, it nevertheless had its advantages. Such as the fact that his fragmented following allowed him to keep track of both major and minor events across Terrania on a scale that no other deity could hope to match. This information could then be used to predict future developments – from something as momentous as a racially-charged war to the seemingly-insignificant fate of one unfortunate gnome. Once armed with this knowledge he could, if he so wished, subtly influence said developments to nudge them towards one outcome or another.

One might say that Chip preferred to work smarter, not harder.

… Which was probably also why he couldn't get along with the earnest, hard-worker types that the God of Earth embodied.

"Look, Goroth," Rupert spoke sternly. "I will admit that I knew full well that there was a non-zero chance of my Hero doing what it did when I appointed it. However, that doesn't mean that I forced, coerced, or otherwise engineered that to happen. Why are you so angry, anyway? Dungeons exist to be conquered, do they not?"

Testing mortals and rewarding them for their efforts was something of a hobby that most gods shared, so it wasn't exactly uncommon for them to have a number of dungeons under their control. This was also why conquering a dungeon, while challenging, was not entirely impossible. While it was technically possible to construct an unbeatable dungeon, doing so would have defeated the whole purpose of its existence.

"Conquered, yes," Goroth nodded. "Completely demolished is another thing entirely."

"This is about the missing dungeon core, isn't it?"

"Not exactly. In my opinion, if someone defeats my dungeon fair and square then they have earned the right to do with the core as they please. I can just channel my divine power and forge a new one in a day or two if I want, so getting angry over something like that is really just pointless."

Mogren rolled her cabbages at the remark. The damned rockhead was obviously trying to rub his superiority in her pavement. Just because Kimberley didn't have the power to directly influence the physical world to the degree that Goroth did didn't mean that he had to be so damned smug about it.

"That is, *if* they beat it fair and square," added the Earth God. "However, that thing and its… team defeated the entire thing in under four hours! At their Levels?! I really don't see that happening without your bloody help! You know we're not supposed to use our divine power in the mortal realm for petty things like that!"

"Ah, I see. Tell me, have you considered that maybe the conquest was easy because your dungeon was shit?"

"It was not shit! It was a work of art! You must have cheated!"

"Okay, look! Let's stop the finger wagging and settle this like responsible deities. We both know that a dungeon's logs hardly tell the whole picture."

It was a fact that a dungeon's records were generally rather bare bones. They didn't so much describe what had happened as record the outcome of encounters. They showed the 'when' and 'where' of 'who' had done 'what,' but not the underlying 'how' and 'why'. That was why the dungeon's Surveillance Net module also recorded images and audio of intruders for future inspection. It was far more reliable than the backup logs, but it would appear that the record had been lost upon the removal of the dungeon's

core. Otherwise Goroth wouldn't be jumping to conclusions and talking out of his ass like this.

"I recorded the entire expedition, you know," Ricky revealed. "I can play it back to you right now to prove that I did *not* cheat, and that Boxxy's gang cleared your so-called 'work of art' entirely through their own efforts and skills."

"Hah! As if I would trust any footage you've been handling! How do I know you haven't altered it in some way?!"

"Alright, then. Let's call Looney in here to mediate. She'll see right through any illusions or whatnot I might have set up, right?"

"Surely Teresa would-"

"That bitch is not setting foot in my house!" Calvin bellowed.

"Alright, alright, calm down," Goroth conceded, his own anger quelled by Jerry's outburst. "Lunar will do."

"Ah, I do apologize for that, my dear chap. I just can't stand it when she starts sneering at me with that self-righteous-"

"Yes, yes, I know. We are all very much aware of your recent… rivalry."

The Goddess of Truth and Justice and Nathaniel didn't exactly see eye to eye, mostly because he was known to be something of a schemer and she, well… wasn't.

"Shall I call Lunar over now?" Goroth suggested.

"Yes, please, if you wouldn't mind."

There was a moment of silence as the God of Earth sent a short telepathic message to the Moon Goddess, she who presided over matters of magic, study and knowledge. It was a common means of communication between the various deities, usually referred to as god-mail, or G-mail for short. A fact that amused the God of Uncertainty to no end for reasons that only he could understand.

"She said she'll be here shortly."

"Very good. I hope she helps us clear this thing up, I sincerely don't want any friction between us."

"… I think it's a bit late for that."

"Ah, come off it. What did I ever do to you?"

"You corrupted my previous Hero, remember?"

Whenever Goroth picked a Hero of the Anvil, he expected them to raise the bar for artisans and artists everywhere. This usually involved pushing the limits of what could be expressed through artistic mediums or mastering

one's craft to the point of becoming world famous. In some ways, it was a much more challenging undertaking than simply slaying a terrible evil or unearthing some long-forgotten secret. The Hero of the Anvil had to move and inspire the world to be better entirely through the fruits of their labour.

"Oh, right, old Shitstain," Leon remarked in a bemused tone. "Okay, I admit I may have had a hand in that, though some of the details got a little… out of control."

"That's putting it mildly, isn't it?! You ruined a superbly talented painter for your own amusement!"

"Look Rocky, I did *not* intend for that guy to start using his poop as paint, okay? That part was completely unintentional!"

She was speaking truthfully. Even the Goddess of Chance could not perfectly control the flows of chaos. Really, all she'd wanted was for the artist in question to do something more interesting and Hero-like than live as a shut-in painting nothing but boring landscapes. Timothy honestly had had the guy's best interests in mind, otherwise he wouldn't have broken the pact between the gods that forbade direct interference with another's Hero.

"Besides, I don't think that's any worse than what your current guy is doing. I mean, what the fuck is 'interpretive dance' supposed to be?"

"It's art, you cretin!"

"You see a bloke that likes to hump the air for no good reason and call it art, but finger painting with faeces isn't?"

"That isn't-"

KA-KLINK

"Oh, Looney's here!"

Chester snapped his fingers before the argument could devolve into further name calling, causing another doorway to appear from thin air. This one opened into a massive library, its shelves stuffed so full with books that they were threatening to overflow.

The divine being presiding over the space had the appearance of a hunched-over granny wearing a pair of half-crescent glasses, a pointy, wide-brimmed hat and a long flowing robe. Her clothes appeared to be woven from the night sky itself, as they were thoroughly pitch-black and speckled with stars which twinkled as if from an unimaginable distance away. Looking at her from a different angle would have revealed an entirely different view of the cosmos, as though she were a window into the depths of space.

“Hey, Gorey, Twitchy,” she rasped.

“Hi, Looney,” Stuart replied, waving his flute.

“Good tidings, Lunar,” Goroth bowed his head-boulder.

“Heard you boys got some dispute you need help with?”

“Indeed. I’ll be showing rocks-for-brains here a recording I took about a week ago and we need you to confirm that it’s not been tampered with in any way.”

The goddess raised an eyebrow.

“I see. Though I must say, this is unusual for you, Twitchy. Oh, wait! This is about that amusing little box you keep talking about, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed!”

“Nice! I’ve been curious to see if it’s really as capable as you boasted over the G-mail!”

“That’s exactly what I want to see as well,” Goroth rumbled.

“Then let’s get this show on the road. Move over!”

The goddess shoved the pile of rocks roughly to the side, taking a seat on the couch. She seemed awfully excited considering she had very little to do with the dispute at hand. The God of Possibility snapped his pencils, and the floating screen began to project the recording, which he had titled ‘How to Wreck a Dungeon 101.’

It started with the scene of Boxxy fighting its way through the vast hedge maze alongside its team and their army of undead. The basic-yet-effective formation mowed down wave after wave of stone soldiers with little difficulty. They were also headed more or less straight for the goal, barring a few detours to loot the common tier of treasure chest sprinkled about the place. Something that would’ve been impossible without Xera’s aerial reconnaissance.

“Wait, you didn’t make your open-air dungeon a no-fly zone?” Lunar asked after a few minutes. “What was the purpose of that maze if you were going to allow that sort of thing?”

“… Okay, I admit, I should have taken flying invaders into account,” Goroth conceded. “What’s with that lich though? Where did she even come from? And why does she keep calling the chest with legs ‘darling?’”

“Ah, long story,” Joey waved his sunflower. “Let’s just say the two have a history and she’s not exactly right in the head.”

“Good thing Morty isn’t here to see this,” Lunar chimed in. “He’d flip his lid if he saw that thing.”

“You seem okay with it, though,” Jeffrey pointed out.

“Intelligent undead have contributed to the study of magic in their own way, you know.”

“Hoh-ho! I see! I guess you can get a lot of work done when you’re able to study day and night without food or sleep, huh?”

Indeed, many of the mortals who turned to lichdom did so with the intent to continue studying and mastering the arcane arts without fear of old age. And as Lunar had stated, quite a few had contributed to the development of magic as a result. Unfortunately, whether they were noble or selfish in origin, such pursuits did not stand the test of time. As the years and decades went by, liches would inevitably succumb to the spiteful, power-hungry nature of their undead species. Their conjured bodies would reflect this change in mentality, with each reincarnation looking less like a person and more like a skeleton held together by cloth and chains.

Valeria as well would have eventually turned into such a ghastly construct had her un-life not been ended so abruptly.

“Anyway, this part is a bit repetitive, so let me just skip ahead to the first boss fight.”

Linda snapped her trees once more and the images on the screen changed to display Boxxy’s troupe taking down the trio of gargoyles with relative ease.

“Wow, okay,” Goroth admitted. “That was impressive. The monster’s shapeshifting was accurate and quick. Good dose of creativity, too.”

The Earth God appreciated art in all forms. To him, sculpting one’s own flesh was no different to carving an image from wood or stone. The Mimic’s smooth transition from weaponising its tentacles to sprouting wings to glide through the air had had a certain kind of beauty to it. Although Goroth was far from Boxxy’s biggest fan, he couldn’t deny that its shapeshifting expertise was likely the result of intense practise and effort.

“Geh, that child used curse magic, didn’t she?” Lunar said sourly. “How many times do I have to tell people!? That sort of thing just gives birth to even more monsters!”

“But… they’re in a dungeon. There’d be monsters there anyway,” Sam pointed out.

“That’s not the point! If she’s using it in the dungeon, then she’ll use it outside of it, too!”

"Yeah, okay. You don't need to worry about that, though. That lich is super dead now. Like, *dead*-dead."

"Come on, Twitchy! Spoilers!"

"Oh… oops."

"Well, whatever. At least I won't need to send my hex-hunters after her."

Hex-hunters were an order of Paladins in service to Lunar, whose Champion of Magic Skill gave them a frankly-unfair advantage when tracking and confronting wielders of cursed items or Hexcraft magic. Lunar tended to get so up in arms about it because curse magic was – in a way – anathema to holy magic. Something so vile that she deemed its use worthy of the same disdain as necromancy.

"Looney. Not cool."

"I know, I know. Sorry about that."

"What's that… thing doing?" Goroth asked, disbelievingly.

The other two turned back to the screen. It was currently relaying the scene of the Mimic slobbering all over the solid-gold treasure chest.

"Kya! How lewd!"

"Don't go 'kya' like that, you old hag! It's not cute at all!" Augustus grumbled.

"No, but for real. What's it doing?"

"It's just appreciating the workmanship on the chest, it's a mimic thing," Kevin explained. "Come to think of it, what's with the pointlessly-decorative item containers? I can understand the golden ones, but even the stone ones?"

"Well. Just because they only appear for a short time doesn't mean that they can't be superbly crafted."

Kevin rolled his bacon. Of *course* this artsy-fartsy blockhead would do something unnecessary like that. But the sight had made the him laugh like a maniac for a good twenty minutes the first time he had seen it, so he withheld from chastising the Earth God. The vaguely-disturbing image soon moved on to the climbing of the Black Stairs and subsequent destruction of the entire swarm of crystalline insects with a single Sonic Scream.

Josefina elected to fast-forward through the boring bits up to the confrontation with the Jade King, which was ended in nearly an instant thanks to Boxxy unleashing all its mass-produced Spell Crystals on the golem at once. Goroth had fallen oddly silent by this point, watching

absentmindedly as the dungeon core was violently dislodged, kicked unceremoniously down the steps and carried outside the dungeon's sphere of influence. At that point, the recording cut off.

"Well," Amanda spoke up. "Did you see any illusions or indications of tampering, Looney?"

"Nope," the Goddess of Magic and Learning replied. "Seems legit to me."

"Satisfied, Goroth?"

"… Yes. I apologize for raising such a fuss earlier."

The Goddess of Chaos stared dubiously at the pile of rocks next to her.

"You're usually more headstrong than this. What gives?"

"I just… Did you know I spent a good three years fine-tuning that Jade King encounter until I had it just right? It was supposed to be an absolutely epic battle with five phases and various different subordinates joining the fight, giving their lives to support and restore their regent. And yet…"

"And yet a single monster blew it all away before the guy even got a chance to show off."

"Yeah."

For a being who valued hard work, having his own efforts so thoroughly wasted was a strangely humbling experience. The fact that his 'finely-crafted' encounter had been blasted to smithereens by a four-month-old mimic was perhaps the biggest blow.

"I understand what you meant now. That dungeon *was* pretty shit, wasn't it?"

"Nah, I wouldn't say that," Lunar butted in. "It's just that they had the proper tools to deal with it. Compatibility trumps raw power, that's just how it is with dungeons, you know?"

"I suppose. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to go and review my other dungeon designs."

The deity's stone avatar stood from the couch, turning to face the God of Luck. Or at least, that's what Thomas assumed, considering that the moving pile of rocks didn't actually have a face.

"Goodbye, Victor. This has been… educational."

Goroth flickered out of existence, presumably returning to his own Divine Area.

"… Those kids were a little *too* well prepared, weren't they?" Lunar asked after a moment of silence. "The lich in particular seemed like she did

most of the work."

"Oh, not you too! I already said I had no hand in what happened to Blockhead's dungeon!"

"Listen here, Twitchy, you might have been able to convince Goroth that it was all his fault, but please don't try to pull that shit on me."

The Goddess of Magic and Learning and the Goddess of Change had more in common than one might think. Though it wasn't readily apparent at first, both deities placed a great deal of value on information. Admittedly, they used different methods and certainly had different goals, but the starting point was the same. That was why under normal circumstances they got along fairly well. Which was, in turn, why Lunar was so familiar with Darren's personality.

"I know you far too well to believe that you didn't orchestrate this entire thing just to knock Gorey down a peg," the Moon Goddess stated confidently.

"Ahhh… found me out, did you?"

It was hardly a stretch. After all, Boxxy wouldn't have been able to leave Goroth's dungeon in ruins if it hadn't managed to find it in the first place, and it couldn't have done that if Valeria hadn't been there to show it the way. And of course, the Mimic and the lich had only been reunited because of Lamar himself. Indeed, merely sending Boxxy and Fizzy on that Hero Quest had set off a chain of events that, factoring in all of the variables, had had a greater than ninety-nine percent probability of resulting in the Spire's destruction.

Which, technically speaking, was still, as Thomas had told Goroth, a 'non-zero chance.'

"Well… he *has* been getting awfully full of himself these past twenty years," Amanda smirked. "A little humility will do him good."

"Honestly, how are you still this rotten?" Lunar shook her head. "You shouldn't toy with your fellow gods like that!"

"And where would be the fun in that? It's far more entertaining to mess with these snot-nosed brats that think themselves superior just because they're popular."

"So you keep saying… Anyway, do send me a G-mail the next time that Hero of yours does something interesting, will you? I've become rather curious about it myself."

“Sure. Just don’t get any funny ideas about making it the Hero of Magic. You know that won’t end well.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, I already have a capable youngster of my own. My interest is more curiosity as to what it’ll do next. And I honestly don’t see it inventing new Spells or anything like that.”

“Well, actually-”

“Twitchy! Spoilers!”

“Oops. Sorry, Looney.”

The goddess shook her head in fond exasperation.

“Whatever. I’ll be going now.”

“Sure thing. Thanks for dropping by.”

“Anytime, just please cut down on the pranks, alright? You’re the eldest of us, you really should act the part.”

With that, Lunar disappeared much like Goroth had, leaving Jason unobserved and allowing him to return to his true form. He sat back down on the couch, conjured another box of popcorn and resumed observing the doppelganger mimicking a mimic mimicking a chest. He was hoping for something exciting to liven his mood, as Lunar’s parting words had left him feeling slightly sour.

Did she not realise how thoroughly boring the world would be if the God of Chaos actually acted like he was the eldest? Did she expect him to suddenly start taking part in that prick-waving contest those upstarts were calling a power struggle? It was a thoroughly banal competition that was not only extremely dull, but also served absolutely no purpose in the grand scheme of things.

After all, when was the last time any of the other members of Terrania’s pantheon had done something as significant as creating the Beyond and filling it with demons? That’s right – never. It was an objective fact that, based on results, the God of Chaos was the hardest-working god in existence. Frankly speaking, the rest of his peers entirely misunderstood why it was he found their little game to be so utterly boring.

It was honestly simple: he’d mop the floor with them if he decided to really put his back into it. Teresa, Axel, Nyrie, Lunar – none of them would last more than a few decades if ‘Twitchy’ truly set out to make his religion the dominant one. In fact, he could probably cut that down to about eight or nine years if he wanted. He could kick their asses so hard that they’d literally cease to exist.

Just like the previous generation of gods.

Chapter Four
Death Comes in Many Shapes
Part One

The village of Carran was a remote settlement housing just under three hundred residents, although it would be a lie to call it a peaceful place. The village was located at the foot of the Sawblade Mountains, and as such often found itself under siege by packs of monsters overflowing from the treacherous peaks. Consequently, the people living there had erected high wooden walls around the village, as protecting themselves otherwise would simply have been impossible. Fortunately for them, they had more than just bare walls to rely on.

Common logic dictated that, wherever monsters cropped up, adventurers would soon appear. And wherever monster hunting professionals went, their guilds would surely follow. Even this isolated little hamlet wasn't exempt from this unwritten law since as many as fifty adventurers from three separate guilds had made their homes here. The rest of the populace earned their livelihoods tending the fields just outside the walls or digging metals from the mine running underneath the village.

As a tiny settlement, they didn't have guards, exactly, but instead relied on a local militia comprised of about two-thirds of its resident adventurers. These people had taken up the dangerous profession out of necessity, the desire to protect their friends and family trumping selfish pursuit of wealth or glory. The rest had fewer ties to the village and were simply drifting through or earning their livelihoods, but nevertheless they all contributed to the safety of the region in one way or another.

Even the outsiders would sometimes take night shifts watching the wall for no pay, thanks in part to Flanne, the local innkeeper's daughter. She would often bring them a homemade breakfast first thing in the morning to reinvigorate their bodies, and her lovely smile was capable of melting even the coldest of hearts. Her kind demeanour, superb cooking and wholesome beauty had made her the most eligible bride in the village, despite her being a member of the village's sole elven household. Even the local housewives looked favourably upon her. She was a central figure in the closely-knit community, a shining demonstration that humans and elves need not hate one another.

It was therefore a crying shame that, on this windy summer night, Flanne was about to pass away in her sleep of natural causes.

[Assassination Skill triggered. Your attack has dealt 500% more damage. Target HP -1,482.]

[You have slain your target in a single strike.]

Or at least, as natural as being stabbed through the heart could be. Statistically speaking, assassination by doppelganger was already the leading cause of death in the village, as the girl was Boxxy's ninety-fourth victim of the night. The spider-chest withdrew its mithril dagger from her body, shaking the blood off and then moving methodically towards the next room to silently dispatch Flanne's father, mother, younger brother and all seven of the inn's guests.

Once everyone in the inn was dead, Boxxy made one more round in order to devour or absorb all of the corpses, then left the building and crept silently into the house next door. After murdering and 'processing' its residents, it moved on to the next dwelling, and then the next after that, each never taking more than a few minutes.

Fizzy and Kora had been instructed to stand by outside the village wall since they were ill-suited to sneaking around. One was a loudmouthed mountain of muscle and violence, the other a half-mad lump of steel. To say that subterfuge wasn't exactly their strong point would be putting it mildly.

As for Xera, while she was adept at moving stealthily, she also lacked a means of silently executing her victims. She had therefore been relegated to scouting duty, keeping an eye on things from the sky to ensure that no nosey neighbours or night watch raised an alarm. While Boxxy was reasonably confident of its ability to take on the entire village, that didn't mean that that was strictly necessary. Not when it could simply slaughter everyone in their sleep without suffering a single scratch.

Peaceful solutions really were for the best.

Besides, it was possible that one of the villagers or adventurers would escape in the confusion, which was something to be avoided at all costs. They would doubtless alert other settlements to Boxxy's presence, the news of which would assuredly reach that terrifying Spymaster in no time flat. Granted, he was bound to eventually discover that Boxxy had been behind the massacre, but later was better than sooner.

When the sun finally rose, Carran village had become a ghost town. Every last one of its residents had been added to the writhing flesh-abyss of

Boxxy's body. The monster had gorged itself upon nearly a hundred bodies before it had felt truly full for the first time since its Rank Up. Even then, it had kept eating. While its hunger had technically been sated, that didn't actually mean that it had eaten its fill, as it appeared that a doppelganger demanded significantly more sustenance than a mimic. Either that, or Boxxy was still suffering from post-Rank Up hunger pains. Only time would tell.

It hadn't eaten all of the corpses, though. The fifty or so adventurers living in Carran it had used as fodder for its Cadaver Absorption, resulting in Attribute gains of +37 AGI, +28 INT and +31 STR, as well as an extra two Levels' worth of Sword Mastery Proficiency. Several of the tastier-looking bodies had been stowed into its Storage for later, and the rest were gobbled up without a single hair left behind. Overeating like that had made Boxxy feel somewhat bloated, but the gluttonous box had never been one for moderation. It could have used Cadaver Absorption on the bodies of the villagers as well, but had decided that raising its Biomass Skill Level was more important, as that would be necessary for its next Rank Up.

Besides, it was every child's duty to eat heartily in order to grow up big and strong – even if said child happened to be a juvenile doppelganger.

And grow it certainly had. Although outwardly it had chosen the same appearance that it had had prior to its Rank Up, its body was easily four, maybe even five times heavier than it had been. The dense tissue could be expanded outwards to roughly the size of a horse with little to no difficulty, though doing so would make the shapeshifter a bigger target.

That was why it preferred to stick to the relatively-compact shape of a spider-legged chest. It could theoretically have taken the smaller form of a nine or ten-year-old child, but Boxxy just didn't feel right outside of a chest-based shape. It would have to break the habit eventually if it wanted to integrate itself into society, but at the moment there was no particular rush.

Once it was finished devouring the populace, Boxxy checked the village once more to make extra sure that there were no people left, living or otherwise. After confirming that Carran was indeed deserted, it returned to the settlement's centre and rested next to the large stone well that had served as the village water source. It wasn't that it was particularly tired, but taking a lazy nap in the warm sun after eating its fill just seemed appropriate.

It slept contently until around noon, its body as per usual becoming active several seconds before its mind, causing it to flail half-consciously. It would seem that Boxxy had yet to master the subtle art of waking up.

"Master?! What's going on?"

Xera's telepathically-transmitted thoughts broke the Mimic out of its half-sleeping stupor, allowing it to once again think clearly.

"Nothing, just woke up."

"Then what was that loud crash just now?"

"Just knocked over the well, nothing to worry about," Boxxy said while digging itself out of the rubble.

"No, that's plenty to worry about! Master, we need to start working on these bad habits of yours," Xera scolded it. "How are you supposed to fit in with the elves if you wreck something every time you wake up?"

She had hoped that the shapeshifter's Rank Up would have allowed it to bring its morning tantrums under control, but they appeared to have only gotten worse.

"Never mind that now. Did you finish looking for all the shiny things?"

The succubus had been instructed to join the other two in search of anything of value once she had confirmed that there were no survivors making a run for it.

"I believe so, Master. We've found a total of 5,530 GP worth of coins and about 1,800 GP worth of jewelry."

"That much?!" Boxxy asked with surprised delight. "I don't remember seeing so many shiny things in the houses last night!"

"You would be correct, Master. A lot of this came from the guild buildings you so graciously left open for us."

Of the three adventurer guilds with a presence in Carran, the most influential by far was the branch office of Griffin Heart. It was the biggest fighter-oriented organisation in the Empire, though its size could probably be attributed to its shockingly low enlistment standards. The other two included the Brotherhood of the Third Eye, a much smaller, independent local magic guild, and the Union of Excavators, which supported the village's mining community.

"I see. Anything else in them?"

"They didn't have any magic items worth a damn," Xera continued, "but we did find a cache of alchemical supplies in the mystic one. It

contained about two dozen healing potions, half as many mana potions, seven fortification elixirs and five different jars of weapon oils."

Elixirs and oils were alchemical products intended to provide long-lasting effects. Drinking a vial of the former would strengthen the body, while the latter imbued the equipment to which it was applied with a temporary magical effect. Boxxy was pleased to have some extra insurance, although it suddenly spotted something worrying in the distance.

"Snack, are you sure that there were no survivors?"

"I am certain of it, Master."

"Then why is there a column of smoke rising towards the east?"

"Ah, your pet golem decided that rummaging through all those houses was beneath her, so she disregarded her orders and went to the smithy. Something about forging components. I tried to stop her, but she wouldn't listen. I think some sort of punishment is necessary, Master."

"It's fine, I was running low on parts anyway. Get Arms and meet me where the smoke is coming from. We'll be leaving soon."

"Understood, Master."

Boxxy strode into the deathly-silent streets with a small spring in its step. Last night had proved even more profitable than it had initially assumed, though it wished that it had been able to raise its Level more. It had barely made it to Level 6 of its Doppelganger Job, despite murdering nearly three hundred people. Even if the vast majority of them had probably been fairly low-Level, it had still expected more. And that wasn't simple greed or impatience speaking, it honestly felt that this slow progression was unusual for a Job still in the single-digit Levels.

One possible reason could be that the maxed-out Mimic Job was still absorbing a portion of the XP, essentially wasting it, but upon reflection this seemed unlikely. The Rank Up process had made Doppelganger into the shapeshifter's main Job, which meant that it should receive priority on murder-based XP. It could simply be that the Doppelganger Job required a lot more XP to Level up than either Mimic or Warlock, so perhaps it would be better to think of it as starting from Level 51 rather than Level 1. Maybe not exactly like that, considering how long the last ten Levels of its Mimic Job had taken, but something along those lines.

Regardless, it was a fact that achieving its next Rank Up would be nowhere near as easy as Boxxy had expected. In addition to reaching Level 25 of its Doppelganger Job, it also required that it raise both Biomass and

Shapeshift to Level 13. It was highly likely that the Rank Up beyond that would require that both Skills be at Level 15, in addition to the Doppelganger Job being Level 50.

The pattern wasn't particularly complicated, so Boxxy felt reasonably confident in its assumption. It would take a lot of work, but it would be worth it in the end. Especially if the monster could obtain high-class Skills like the one it had gotten upon reaching Level 5.

[Mirror Image]

The doppelganger creates body doubles to confuse and befuddle its opponents.

Requirements: Doppelganger Job, 100 END, 100 INT, 100 WIS

Type: Active

Activation Time: Instant

Cost: 400 MP

Range: 5 Meters

[Effects]

Creates an autonomous replica of the user's body.

Mirror Images will last for 15 seconds per Level of the Shapeshift Skill.

Mirror Images will inherit a portion of the original's Attributes equal to 10% per Level of this Skill.

Mirror Images cannot activate any Skills, Spells or Martial Arts.

The Skill seemed similar to the Conjure Fleshling Skill that Boxxy could have unlocked from its Mimic Job, but with far more potential. As described, activating it caused an exact replica of the shapeshifter's current form to quite literally leap from its original body. The relatively high MP cost had been a bit daunting, but made sense considering that the Skill activated instantly with no diminishment to its Biomass reserves.

These Mirror Images behaved much like living dolls – they had no sense of independent self and readily followed any orders Boxxy gave them. However, they weren't completely brainless like Valeria's undead had been. They possessed a small degree of autonomous judgement, making them excellent disposable pawns, and the shapeshifter had used them extensively to speed up the culling process last night. Their actual fighting ability may have been lacking due to the Skill's low Level, but it was nonetheless more than adequate to deal with some sleeping villagers.

Still, the potential power and versatility of the ability was incredible, even considering that it had come from a high-class shapeshifting species.

The only real downside was that the duplicates couldn't use active Skills such as Mend Flesh or Acid Spray, but they could still make use of the passive ones, like Adaptive Defense or Natural Armour. And while they initially spawned with no weapons of their own, they could easily create equipment as necessary through their Metal Mimicry. They would even be able to fight with a certain degree of expertise due to the various Mastery Skills at their disposal.

Though that wasn't to say that the copies didn't come with a myriad of downsides in addition to the Spell, Skill and Arts restriction. They would never be as quick-witted or ferocious as their original, leaving them hopelessly outmatched against skilled opponents fighting intelligently. Their bodies were also fairly light, with very little to work with in the Biomass department, and their shapeshifting ability was bound to suffer for it.

But the most troublesome problem by far was communication. The body doubles lacked the convenient telepathic link that Boxxy shared with its familiars, meaning that words and gestures were the only way to convey its orders. Killing by proxy also likely meant that only a portion of the XP would be transferred to the original, if its experience with Summon Familiar was any indication. At least its Mirror Image Skill Proficiency had risen relatively rapidly, allowing the ex-Mimic to reach Level 4 of the Skill in a single night.

It had wondered if it wouldn't it be possible to use the Mirror Images as a sort of workforce to mass-produce traps and gadgets, but quickly dismissed it as a stupid idea. For one thing, it was highly unlikely that its Artificer Job would grow if it were to relegate the work to others. Not to mention that there wasn't much that they could realistically accomplish with a lifespan of only a few minutes. Besides, if it wanted help with an Artificer project, then it already had someone on hand that would gladly give her all to assist it.

Boxxy began to pick up the distinct noise of metal striking metal as it made its way closer to the source of the smoke it had seen earlier. The rhythmic ringing echoed through the now-deserted village, like a funeral bell marking the death of the settlement.

When the former mimic finally reached the open-air smithy, it was greeted with the peculiar sight of Fizzy hammering and shaping a piece of red-hot iron with her bare hands.

“Oh, hey Boxxy!” she called when she noticed it approach. “Give me a minute to finish this up, okay?”

“Okay.”

Her smiling face once more became focused as she resumed pounding the half-molten metal shard. Sparks flew as her tiny fist smashed into the strip of iron on the anvil, which was probably why she had removed her clothes and was currently smithing in the nude. After all, Boxxy reasoned, her outfit might catch fire if she wore it under those circumstances, and it was the only set of clothes that would fit her, even if loosely.

“Master, we are here.”

“Hey, boss! Have a nice nap?”

Xera and Kora arrived shortly thereafter, the latter carrying a wooden chest on one shoulder and a leather trunk on the other. The first was filled with coins, jewelry and other valuables of note while the other held the alchemical supplies that Xera had mentioned earlier. The fiend set them down in front of Boxxy, then turned her attention towards the golem.

“Hey squirt. Nice rack as always,” she said, flashing two thumbs up.

“Huh?” Fizzy replied dumbly. “What are you- Oh for Rusty’s sake! It happened again!”

She stomped towards the pile of clothes in the corner and pulled them on hastily, huffing in exasperation. It would seem that her stripping habit had resurfaced without her noticing, and just when she’d finally thought she had it under control. She immediately returned to applying her Component Forging Skill without saying another word. Kora watched as the golem pouted noticeably before her attention was caught by precisely *how* the Paladin was working.

“Don’t your hands hurt, doing it that way?” she asked curiously.

“Nope!” Fizzy said, smiling broadly. “Don’t feel anything but the impact!”

“That’s convenient,” Kora said doubtfully, “but won’t your hand melt if you keep doing that?”

“Hah! As if such weak flames could hope to damage my glorious frame!” the golem replied proudly. “You shouldn’t underestimate a golem’s steel!”

“Hoh-ho! Is that right?” Xera asked with a small grin.

“Oy, better watch yourself, pipsqueak,” Kora cautioned. “The Slutinator is getting that mad look in her eye.”

“I’ll be sure to ram the handle of my wrench up her ass if she tries anything.”

“That’s exactly what she wants you to do, though…”

Fizzy chose to ignore the demons to continue shaping the iron plate.

“Oh! I almost forgot,” the tiny Paladin exclaimed suddenly. “I found a thing inside the smithy’s storage room.”

She reached into her back pocket, pulling out a rough, uncut and unpolished gemstone. It was about three centimetres in diameter and coloured a deep red, so dark it bordered on black. She went over to Boxxy, who was currently engrossed in appraising the loot that the familiars had brought, and presented the stone to the shapeshifter with a huge smile on her face.

“Here you go, Boxxy!”

The former mimic stopped what it was doing to inspect the item carefully. The rough surface was distinctly lacking in shininess, making this object seem more like a pebble than a precious stone. And yet the monster’s MLG couldn’t help but notice the strange flow of mana that seemed to swirl around it, like a frigid lump of ice which condensed the water in the air into a fine mist.

“What is this?” it asked curiously.

“I’ve never seen one of these before, but it was labeled as ‘unrefined Midnight Ruby.’ I thought you’d-”

“It’s a *what*?!”

Boxxy’s tentacle shot out immediately, seizing the stone from Fizzy’s grasp. Xera and Kora were momentarily shocked that the creature would ignore the literal bag of gold in favour of the thoroughly un-shiny rock, but then the succubus remembered why her master would want the magical gemstone so badly.

Other than a night when all three of Terrania’s moons were visible, it was the last component Boxxy would need in order to perform the Ritual of Unholy Wealth.

Part Two

Boxxy's group continued their trek north for four more days without anything of significance taking place. Although the monster was quite eager to perform the ritual said to call forth 'Unholy Wealth,' it had no idea when it would actually be able to do it. It didn't even know what moons actually were, let alone anything about their orbits or phases. 'Big glowing things that sometimes appeared in the sky' was the extent of its astronomical knowledge on the matter.

Thinking back, the first and last time that it had seen all three celestial bodies at once was the night when it had first left the confines of its dungeon birthplace, which was so far in the past that it felt like a lifetime ago. Could it be that the moons aligning was a comparatively rare occurrence?

Then again, it may have simply not noticed since it wasn't really in the habit of staring at the night sky. The glittering, jewel-like stars were forever out of its reach, like an unobtainable collection of shiny things that existed only to taunt the simple creature. As a consequence, Boxxy made a point of thoroughly ignoring the night sky – a decision which it was now regretting.

Any attempts to consult its minions on the matter proved equally futile, but of course, none of them could be expected to have any knowledge of astronomy. After all, the two demons were more interested in their genitals than the cosmos, and Fizzy had always been the early to bed, early to rise type. While her new steel body no longer demanded sleep, she nonetheless remained ignorant on the subject of celestial movements.

She wasn't the only one whose Rank Up had altered their sleeping habits. Apparently, a doppelganger's higher cognitive functions demanded substantially more upkeep than a mimic's, which meant that it needed nearly twice as much sleep. Whereas before Boxxy had been able to maintain its vigilance for almost a full week, these days it was finding it difficult to remain awake after as little as two or three days. It was worth it, though, because the monster's ability to recognise and understand patterns had increased significantly. It was able to apply Xera's acting lessons with far greater ease, likely due to its new species' predisposition towards infiltration and subterfuge.

All in all, Boxxy was relatively pleased with its choice of Rank Up. It had yet to realise, however, that queen slimes were actually far more dangerous in combat than doppelgangers. Their amorphous bodies held not

one, but dozens or even hundreds of slime cores, all networking together to form what was essentially a self-contained hive-mind. As such, their growth potential when it came to intelligence and critical thinking skills was frankly enormous. In addition, their bodies were quite a bit more formidable than doppelgangers', as the goop they controlled was supremely resistant to physical trauma in all forms. It could also be shifted about in a more free-form manner than doppelgangers, which would always need to maintain the integrity of their spinal column.

Queen slimes could also divide their bodies into smaller, fully-sentient blobs, though that was risky since it also meant splitting their Attributes and leaving parts of themselves more vulnerable. It was nonetheless a powerful survival tactic, as a queen slime could survive as long as at least a handful of its cores were left undamaged and would be able to make a full recovery if given enough time and food. At least physically, as losing too many of their 'brains' tended to result in permanent memory loss.

However, while a queen slime's shapeshifting ability was a weapon in its own right, a doppelganger's was clearly superior when it came to blending in with civilised society. Much like mimics, it was nigh-impossible to tell their false form apart from the genuine article. Body proportions, skin tone, hair, nails, internal organs, speech, mannerisms, gestures – every part of a person could be imitated to a near-ridiculous degree. They were so good at it that they had once been widespread enough to make up roughly five to ten percent of any given settlement's population.

But that had been a long time ago. Once Scribes had become commonplace and Appraisal checks were the norm, it became harder and harder for them to live quiet, uninterrupted lives. The enlightened races of the world couldn't just turn a blind eye to them, either, as a foetus had to be murdered in order for a doppelganger to be born. Additionally, they generally had no regard for sentient lives other than their own, gladly employing murder as a means of furthering their goals.

The tensions had eventually led to decades of open hostilities, a turbulent period that history now referred to as the Silent Rebellion. It had been one of the few times when the disparate races of Terrania had set aside their differences to purge the world of the shapeshifting menace. Though the specifics had since been lost to the ages, the fact that doppelgangers were now practically extinct made it clear which side had won.

Not to mention the various anti-shapeshifter practices that survived even into the modern day. While not as rigorous as they had once been, Appraisal checks to verify one's identity were still widespread, and Scribes were heavily regulated, requiring thorough background checks and various magical safeguards before the Job could be passed onto new applicants.

For example, all Scribes were required to undergo a bi-annual shock-test, as lightning was the Bane of pretty much every shapeshifting monster in existence. A powerful electric current would not only cause them severe damage, but also paralyse and force them to revert to their base form. Boxxy had experienced firsthand electricity's devastating effects, and personally felt that such a weakness was not only unfair but entirely unwarranted.

Its perspective was, of course, an entirely skewed and biased one, as civilisation would have been unable to flourish as well as it had if the world's monsters had had no weaknesses to exploit. The beasts had greater strength, speed and endurance, meaning that the enlightened had to use their wits and intelligence above all. Information and knowledge were their greatest weapons, which was why the Silent Rebellion could only have ended one way. As cunning as doppelgangers were, they had ultimately been no match for the combined efforts of multiple civilisations.

Granted, people's wariness of doppelgangers had diminished greatly since the days of the Silent Rebellion, but the threat was always at the back of people's minds. Every now and then, tales of a shapeshifter being discovered would circulate, often resulting in city-wide Appraisal sweeps. The checks rarely turned up anything, as doppelgangers were rare and the few that remained would readily abandon their fake identities and run away in order to avoid being discovered. At any rate, they would never again be able to infiltrate civilisation in any meaningful way, as it would be impossible to avoid Appraisals forever.

Unless, of course, one happened to be Boxxy T. Morningwood. The former mimic was now a Hero, and its Essence Concealment Skill allowed it to deceive the mandatory examinations. It still had to be wary of electricity, but that would likely be a relatively uncommon problem. There was no danger in nature outside of thunderstorms, and only Wizards and Shamans were capable of conjuring lightning with magic. Very few magic items were electrically-imbued due to its unstable nature, and Arclight Artificers like Fizzy were a rarity outside of gnomish lands.

All things considered, as a weakness it was deadly but nonetheless manageable. Boxxy had therefore decided to seek out magic items that would either provide additional defense against that particular element, or just magic in general. Although it was impossible to completely neutralise a monster's Bane, it was sure that at the very least there were ways to dampen its negative effects. And such equipment could be easily obtained so long as it was able to integrate itself into a large enough city.

And therein lay the biggest problem, for in order to successfully do so, it had to act and speak in a manner befitting an actual person. Social skills which Boxxy still needed to practise.

Thus, the former mimic had abandoned its preferred chesty shape in favour of a young elf just on the cusp of manhood. Its disguise appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen years old, with pale skin, short ginger hair and bright green eyes. To complete the look, it wore a long, dark red robe with a purple eye insignia on the shoulder and carried an engraved but otherwise plain wooden staff with a grey crystal serving as the head.

It had 'borrowed' its new form from one of the adventurers residing in the village of Carran, and had been wearing it ever since its party had happened upon the Imperial highway. Walking on two legs was uncomfortable and slightly irritating, but Boxxy couldn't complain too much. If everything worked out, it would be spending the majority of its time in a humanoid shape anyway, so it was better to get used to it sooner rather than later.

As for why, precisely, it had chosen this particular body, that much was simple. Its instincts as both a doppelganger and a mimic had driven it to assume a plain visage that would slip easily from one's memory. The appearance of a snot-nosed youngster, therefore, was more or less perfect for that goal. The forgettable presence would undoubtedly make others ignore the shapeshifter all on their own, allowing it to easily blend into a crowd. It helped that becoming a doppelganger had vastly improved its control over its pigmentation, otherwise it would never have been able to replicate its new form so completely.

Of course, it hadn't relied solely on its own skewed judgment to determine the adequacy of its disguise. According to Snack, Boxxy's new face was so bland and uninteresting that even she reflexively ignored it, while Arms had stated that it looked weak and easy to push around. Fizzy had simply offered a slightly disinterested 'looks fine to me.'

Such mediocre reviews meant that it would certainly do very well in avoiding unwanted attention once they had crossed the border. Putting that assumption to the test was why it had continued travelling along the Imperial highway instead of skulking through the surrounding wilderness. Not only would it allow them to meet and greet fellow travellers, but the shapeshifter could easily eradicate the lot of them with no witnesses should things turn sour.

And lo and behold, the quartet of monsters had indeed run into a group of people on this fine afternoon. A fancy-looking horse-drawn carriage was traveling in the opposite direction, presumably headed for the Imperial capital to the southwest. It was large enough to accommodate its six passengers with room to spare, with a sizable pile of luggage strapped to the roof. The vehicle's spotless white paint, gold-trimmed roof and windows and official griffin's-head crest signified its passengers as people of importance to the Empire. Which would explain the twenty or so heavily-armed mounted knights escorting it.

Realising that these were definitely not people with whom it should be interacting, Boxxy employed the 'smile and wave' strategy as the carriage was passing by. According to Snack, this was a tried and true method for avoiding lingering attention, though she had mostly only said that because her master had yet to kick the habit of constant vapid smiling. As it seemed fixing that would still take some time, she had thought of a way to make it work to their advantage.

However, the plan apparently wasn't foolproof. The armed guards, the passengers, the coach driver and even the horses all gawked, wide-eyed and slack-jawed, at the ginger elf waving merrily at them as they approached. They stared for a good ten seconds before one of the escorts signalled for the entire convoy to stop some fifteen metres from the disguised monster. The man in question had the shiniest helmet and the sharpest-looking spear, so it was safe to assume that he was in charge of the procession.

"Who goes there?!" he shouted, adjusting his grip on his weapon. "Identify yourselves at once!"

Boxxy wasn't entirely sure what it had done to warrant this kind of aggressive reaction. Its first instinct was to rip the nasty human to shreds and feast on his delicious entrails, but it had to refrain. That would ruin the whole purpose of the training exercise, not to mention that it was wary of angering so many tough-looking opponents.

“Hello. My name is Bo-”

“Not you, twig!” the man interrupted. “I’m talking about those things over there!”

It was only when Boxxy looked over its shoulder that it realised its mistake. It wasn’t its disguise that was the problem, but the company it kept.

“What’s that, pencil dick?!” Kora snapped. “You want a piece of this? Huh?!”

“Ankles, spine, neck,” Fizzy mumbled, pondering the order in which she would dismantle this rude infidel. After all, Boxxy was her God’s chosen Hero – she could never sit idly by and allow such disrespect. “Oh, maybe shins, crotch then skull would be good too.”

Xera didn’t say anything, instead burying her face in her palms when she arrived at the same conclusion as her master. She felt like an idiot for not recognising such an obvious flaw in the plan. Looking at it objectively, travelling with a four-armed mountain of muscle, a walking steel statue and a practically naked buxom beauty would raise suspicion no matter how innocently unassuming her master made itself out to be. Even if she were to disguise herself, the other two simply stood out too much.

In her defence, however, she had been busy coming up with ways to get the box-brained buffoon to stuff various things inside her, so her goof was entirely understandable.

And anyway, it wasn’t as though the situation was entirely unsalvageable. She quickly relayed a few telepathic instructions to Boxxy on how best to disperse the tense atmosphere. It was obvious that the knight and the people behind him were nobles, which meant that they were likely self-righteous assholes who wouldn’t know left from right without someone to tell them which was which. All her master would have to do was appeal to their over-inflated sense of self-worth.

“I beg you to forgive my minions, Sir Knight,” Boxxy said respectfully. “They are rather rude.”

The man’s gaze returned to the figure before him, with all of his subordinates and passengers following suit.

“*Your* minions?! Is a twerp like you really capable of controlling these things?!”

[Your actions have altered the flows of chaos.]

The same cryptic notification that had heralded Fizzy's unprecedented transformation into a golem flashed inside the shapeshifter's mind. The unexpected and unknown element put the creature on edge, but it succeeded in concealing its unease and forced itself to focus on the conversation.

"Yes, milord. I may be incompetent, but I can do at least this much. Allow me to demonstrate."

The knight raised an eyebrow questioningly as the apparent-elf turned to face the clearly-aggressive demon.

"Arms. Punch yourself in the face twenty-five times. No holding back."

"Aw, man," Kora whined dejectedly, before proceeding to viciously kick her own ass.

"The rest of you, bow before the brave knight."

Xera and Fizzy prostrated themselves as instructed, and Boxxy itself took a knee in order to pander to the knight's obvious ego.

"Humpf. At least you know your place, twig," the knight admitted grudgingly.

"It is so, milord. A lowly creature like me would never dare to presume itself equal to someone as great as yourself. Surely your heroic exploits are beyond anything my feeble self could ever dream of performing."

These were not, of course, its own words, but the pointless flattery Xera was telepathically spoon-feeding it. And her efforts appeared to be working, if the soldier's increasingly arrogant attitude was any indication. He was so full of himself that he didn't even realise that the source of those goosebumps he was feeling weren't coming from the demon currently pounding her own face but the 'twig' that he had so offhandedly dismissed. After all, while Boxxy's present appearance was far less threatening than 'Mister Morningwood' had been, its Butcher of Humanity Perk still put people on edge. It chose to interpret the misunderstanding as a learning experience, as this sort of misdirection was bound to be useful in the future.

"Very well! Since you have shown humility then I, the gracious Sir Graham Brown, shall spare your worthless life!"

"I am grateful for such mercy, milord."

The knight sneered.

"If you understand, then step aside, twig! We have more important things to do than entertain the likes of you!"

Boxxy stood and, without lifting its gaze, moved to the side of the road to give the carriage plenty of room to pass. The man called Brown signalled

the stupefied coachman to resume their journey, while the other knights kept a close watch on the still-bowing trio and the fiend continuing to hit herself with enough force to send blood flying everywhere. The well-dressed passengers inside kept gawking at the curious entourage, exchanging unflattering comments in barely-hushed whispers.

There was also one small boy saying 'I want one!' as he pointed shamelessly at Fizzy. A dangerous request, as nobles were known to do exactly as they pleased. Normally, they would not hesitate to attempt to take the steel golem by force just to spoil their child, which would undoubtedly result in Boxxy ripping them apart to feast on their rotten heads. Thankfully for everyone involved, the monster's unsettling presence appeared to be keeping any selfish inclinations in check.

Several minutes passed before the convoy was out of sight, and Boxxy silently resumed its trek.

"Uh, Boxxy?" Fizzy spoke up. "Are you sure you want to just let them go?"

"I am."

"Why?"

"The humans on the horses would be tricky to kill. The armour stinks of magic and there were a lot of them."

Even if it didn't know their Levels, the enchanted gear alone would have made them difficult to bring down.

"We could always stalk them and smash their heads in their sleep," the golem suggested.

"No need to risk it."

"But… but! They disrespected you!"

"So?"

"So?! Aren't you angry? I'm fuming over here!"

And that was putting it mildly. The pint-sized Paladin was practically raring to go on a one-woman crusade right about now.

"I'm sure we can crush those guys with ease!" she kept insisting.

"The soldiers, maybe. But that guy in the carriage was dangerous."

"… Guy? What guy?"

"Master is probably referring to the man with the black beard and the pointy hat," Xera chimed in. "He may have looked frail, but he was definitely someone well versed in magic. Likely a Warlock himself, given

the scrutiny with which he was looking at me and the knuckle-head. That's not an opponent we can ignore while trying to handle so many tin soldiers."

"What she said," Boxxy confirmed. "You should avoid fighting large groups of people if you can't take out the magic users first. Like when we first faced Nasty in that tower."

"I… see. I guess I shouldn't just leap into things just because I have a steel body," Fizzy lamented. "Going to need to work hard on controlling my violent side."

Risk/reward assessment was a vital part of intelligent fighting, as some battles were simply not worth the effort and were better off avoided. Boxxy had no doubt that this was precisely such a case. The last thing it needed was to get on the bad side of yet another human who might turn out to be a monster in his own right. Which wasn't to say that it didn't have doubts regarding its decision. Those people had looked wealthy, and wealth meant shinies, which in turn meant happiness for Boxxy. However, it wouldn't be able to enjoy any of that if it was dead, and therefore letting the carriage go had been both the right decision and an easy one.

[The flows of chaos have returned to their default, causal state.]

Its Hero Skill had even ceased whatever it had been doing, reinforcing the shapeshifter's theory that it had made the right call.

It was, however, still underestimating just how significant even the tiniest action could prove to be.

Part Three

A cheap carriage rattled along the cobblestone highway. Unlike the fancy gilded stagecoach that Boxxy had encountered the day before, this was a simple, unpainted wagon with a piece of canvas stretched over its contents. Pulling it along were two green-furred creatures resembling oversized anteaters, easily the size of donkeys, though the creatures known as limeticks were far more capable of hauling ass. The predominantly subterranean beasts were one of the few docile species of magical creatures, often employed as beasts of burden by both dwarves and gnomes since ages past.

It should have come as no surprise, therefore, that the driver of the old tent-on-wheels was a dwarf – a relatively young male whose brown beard was barely even stubble. He had a full head of bushy hair and small, narrow eyes that looked as though he could barely see beyond his thick, round nose. His build as a whole could be described as pudgy, if one were feeling generous, or a 'ball with limbs' if they weren't.

The dwarf turned his head lazily to shout towards the interior of the wagon.

"We're almost at Bootsplit, laddie!"

"Thanks for the heads up, Moron," the ginger-haired 'elf' sitting inside answered.

"Oh, for the love of- it's Mornon! *More, none!*" he enunciated.

"Not his fault your parents picked such a lousy name," the steel golem sitting next to the monster-in-disguise pointed out.

"Yeah, tell me about it. Been thinking about having it changed, but I can't think of anything good."

"How about Moron?" Boxxy suggested. "It fits."

"Come now, lad. Is that any way to talk to someone graciously giving you a ride?"

That's exactly why it fits, Fizzy retorted internally.

After all, he had to be a special kind of idiot to just pick up random hitchhikers without asking any questions. He hadn't even batted an eye at the fact that one of them was a self-aware golem and just said 'Hop on!' without a care in the world. He could've at least shown a tiny bit of interest towards her situation, Fizzy pouted to herself. What was the point of working so hard on practicing her cover story if people weren't even going to bother asking her about it?

Then again, judging from the contents of the cart, the guy wasn't exactly the sharpest tool in the shed. His luggage was strewn about haphazardly with no rhyme or reason. Crates of food, kegs of ale, several bundles of firewood and other useless meatbag accessories rattled loudly with every bump in the road. The least he could have done was tie them down so they wouldn't make such a racket.

Fizzy wasn't even sure why they had bothered to hitch a ride in the first place. If it was about getting from point A to point B, then they could just as easily have kept going on foot. She could swear that they had been walking faster than these damned limeticks were pulling the cart. Unfortunately, as slow and loud as it was, Boxxy had said that it wanted to ride in the cart, which meant that they were riding in the stupid cart, even if Fizzy had no idea what had caused its sudden desire for social interaction.

The actual reason was fairly simple. Although it also allowed it to practise its socialising, Boxxy had honestly just wanted to ride in a carriage. Not only was it a new experience, but being inside a giant box with wheels helped to alleviate the vague sense of agoraphobia it felt as a result of not having its chesty shell.

As for its familiars, Snack and Arms were following from a safe distance, keeping carefully out of sight. Boxxy didn't particularly care for this arrangement, as it left it slightly more vulnerable, but sacrifices had to be made for the sake of camouflage.

"Alright, we're here," Mornon informed them as the carriage ground to a halt. "You two might wanna get off and let the guards sign you in."

Boxxy and Fizzy did as he suggested and stepped out of the wagon. Around them was a hilly, untamed wilderness of wild shrubs and patches of tall grass, with the odd tree dotting the landscape. A few fenced-off farms and ranches were visible in the distance, and directly in front of the cart was the entrance to a small town called Bootsplit, a primarily dwarven settlement.

It may have seemed slightly out of place, considering this was the predominantly-human Lodrak Empire, but dwarven settlements like Bootsplit were actually not all that uncommon. Historically speaking, humans had always profited immensely from trade with the dwarven Kingdom of Horkensaft, which lay across the Oculus Sea to the northeast. The good relations meant that there were quite a few dwarven and gnomish immigrants living in the Empire.

The opposite was also true, although humans living abroad rarely established their own communities, generally preferring to mingle with the native peoples. The same could also be said about the elves, to a certain degree. The only reason ethnically uniform places like Bootsplit even existed was due to cultural differences, as dwarves and gnomes placed great importance on family and heritage, often stating that their loyalty was to their clan first and their country second. The two races were also believed to be closely related, as the slightly-taller and stouter dwarves and the nimbler, more quick-witted gnomes had lived together for millenia.

Granted, it hadn't always been a peaceful coexistence, but it was inevitable that they would share certain traditions and beliefs.

All things considered, Bootsplit wasn't really that odd. What *was* odd, however, was how utterly defenceless it appeared, despite its proximity to the Imperial highway. Its perimeter was marked not by a sturdy wall, but a collection of wooden stakes that had been driven into the ground and tied together. It seemed more like a fence intended to keep out troublesome wild animals than a fortification to safeguard the populace against danger.

The apparently-lackluster defences, however, were simply because they were all the town actually needed. Both the number and Levels of the monsters along the Imperial highway were typically extremely low, as the Empire made every effort to maintain a high level of security around its first-class road. The government often sent patrols to exterminate any monster nests or clear out bandits that may have posed a threat. Their security measures had intensified as of late, which lent credibility to the rumours that the Empire was gearing up for war with the elves to the north. After all, securing supply lines was the most basic of basics when it came to warfare.

Boxxy and Fizzy walked up to the guards – an intimidating pair of dwarves clad in extra-thick, pitch-black plate armour. Their helmets concealed their faces entirely, save for the braided beards that flowed from underneath their face plates like hairy waterfalls. They carried shields roughly a metre-and-a-half high – almost as tall as themselves – and each had a pair of short-handled war axes strapped to their waists.

"Who goes there?" the guard on the left called, his voice slightly muffled. "Oh, Moro- **ahem** Mornon, was it?"

"Yeah, I'm back from my trip to the capital. I picked these folks up on the way back."

The guard glanced over at the stupidly-smiling elf and the frowning, gnome-shaped golem, but didn't appear particularly surprised. Neither, after all, were particularly uncommon sights around Bootsplit. The elven border was relatively nearby, so they often had knife-ears passing through town, and both dwarves and gnomes often used golems for heavy lifting, though that was usually restricted to well-off merchants and nobles. The guards had therefore assumed that the sentient pile of steel was one of those, since she was simply standing quietly by her master's side rather than running around trying to stab people. Admittedly, using golems was a bit out of character for the tree-huggers, but it was hardly worth raising a fuss over.

"I see, so that's how it is," the guard murmured as he turned around. "Hey Lenny! Get your ass out here, you got work to do!"

"Oh, you're free to go in, Mornon," said the other guard. "We'll take care of your mates here."

He was technically supposed to make the returnee go through an Appraisal along with the others, but he didn't see the point since everyone knew everyone in the tightly-knit community.

"Thanks lads. I'll be going ahead then!"

The dwarf gave the reins a tug, prompting his limeticks to head through the gap in the fence that appeared to serve as one of the city's gates.

"Alright then. What's your story, lad?" the first guard asked Boxxy.

"I'm headed north, past the border."

"Ah, finally had enough of the humans, eh?"

"That's one way of putting it."

The guard grinned.

"Can't blame you for wanting some time away. I don't have a problem with 'em myself, but I get why your folk might have some beef with 'em. To be honest, I'd much rather live in the capital, but my family decided to move out here for some damned reason. Pops is the head of the household, so what he says goes, you know?"

"Ugh, tell me about it," Fizzy rolled her eyes. "People need to listen to their kids more often."

"Yeah, I honestly don't- It can talk?!"

The guard practically shouted the last part, and his colleague seemed to share in his surprise.

"Holy fuck! I've never seen a golem *talk* before! This thing must be a really high-class model!"

“I’ll say! Now that I look at it, doesn’t the steel skin seem particularly sturdy? I mean, I’m no Blacksmith, but I know good metal when I see it!”

Rather than being distressed or suspicious, however, they actually seemed genuinely impressed.

“Oh? Well, I suppose even plebeians like you are capable of recognising my greatness.”

Fizzy was greatly enjoying the attention, so she allowed the guards to continue praising her to their hearts’ content.

The dwarves continued to remark on the beauty of her steel frame and apparent sturdy construction until a third arrived on the scene. This one was much older, much balder, and dressed in light, clean clothes rather than armour.

“Oy, Lenny! Check this out!” one of the guards pointed. “A talking golem!”

“Those exist?!” the newcomer exclaimed.

“I most certainly do,” Fizzy stated, more than a hint of pride in her voice.

“Fascinating!” he exclaimed, stroking his waist-length white beard. “I must say, the way your facial expression moves is extremely lifelike! And your torso is so natural and well-detailed it looks more like a wild golem’s than one produced in a workshop. The level of detail around the belly button and the nipples is particularly excellent.”

“N-nipples?”

Fizzy looked down at herself. As expected, her rude right hand had begun stripping without her notice yet again. However, she found herself hesitant to cover up. What she felt from their stares and incredulous words wasn’t embarrassment, but a sense of accomplished fulfillment. The golem genuinely felt like leaving her girls permanently exposed might not be such a bad idea. One couldn’t appreciate a work of art if it was covered up, right?

“Ack! No!” she blurted, hurriedly putting her clothes back on.

That was dangerous, she had almost become a shameless pervert like a certain succubus. Besides, running around naked would be an overall inconvenience to Boxxy. While unclothed personal golems weren’t exactly illegal in gnomish and dwarven society, they were generally frowned upon. Especially if they happened to be… anatomically correct.

“Say, laddie,” Lenny turned towards the elf. “How d’you keep her so shiny? That steel’s lustre makes it seem like she’s practically brand new! Do

you use some special oil or cleaning fluid?!”

“No,” Boxxy answered. “I just lick her.”

“…”

The three dwarves stared in stunned silence, attempting to process that particular bit of information along with all of its implications.

“You… lick her?” Lenny asked.

“Yes.”

“Like, with your tongue?”

“Yes.”

“All of her?!”

“Yes.”

“Is it really that strange?” Fizzy asked. “Using spit to clean stains is a bit crude, but everyone does it now and then. Especially when access to running water is limited.”

“S-stains?”

“Oh yeah. I get covered in bodily fluids almost every day, so it’s best to get them off before they dry and get all crusty.”

All three dwarves silently reached the same conclusion – the elf was a total deviant. They had no idea that the ‘bodily fluids’ Fizzy was referring to were the brains, blood and bile that splattered all over her during a fight. Having her glorious steel frame covered in meatbag juices was not something she particularly enjoyed.

“Ahem!”

Lenny cleared his throat, clearly intending to get as far away from the topic as quickly as dwarvenly possible.

“Now then. I’ll be performing a Basic Appraisal to verify your identity. Any objections?”

“None,” Boxxy replied with a smile.

This sort of thing was common practise when entering a town or city for the first time, so it had prepared in advance. Still, this would be the first real test of the fake Status screen that it had created with its Essence Concealment Skill, so Boxxy couldn’t help but feel a bit on edge. It was ready to toss Fizzy into its Storage and make a run for it if something went wrong and its true identity was discovered.

“Alright, then hold out your right hand and- Wait, when’s the last time you washed it?”

“Uh… Been on the road so… I don’t know. Does that matter?”

“Ah… no, I guess not…”

Lenny somewhat hesitantly grasped the elf’s palm as though they were shaking hands, making a mental note to scrub it down with soap afterwards.

“Basic Appraisal,” he chanted.

Unlike a Full Appraisal, which could only be performed once a day, a Basic Appraisal could be done as often as the Scribe wished, although the information gathered was quite incomplete. It was unable to gauge Skills, Attributes or Perks, but that data wasn’t necessary to perform the mandatory security check.

“Name’s Chester Underwood,” Lenny recited the information scrolling through his head. “Male, elf, aged seventeen. Only Job is Warlock at Level 25. No guild affiliation.”

He pulled a ledger from the large bag strapped over his shoulder and began to leaf through the pages. After first confirming that ‘Chester Underwood’ was not on the list of wanted criminals, he proceeded to mechanically copy the details onto the paper. Once he was done, he purged the Basic Appraisal’s results from his mind and turned his attention back to the odd visitor.

“How long will you be staying in town, Mister Underwood?”

“A few days at most.”

“Just passing through on your way to the border?”

“Yes.”

Lenny wrote down the time and date of Chester’s visit, as well as the visitor’s responses to his questions.

“And what will you be doing while you’re in town?”

“Resting and buying supplies for the trip. Might do a few Quests at the Mercenary Guild.”

That comment caused the dwarf’s quill to come to an abrupt halt, and he stared sternly at the stranger.

“This is a peaceful and honourable community, son. Those vultures do not have a presence here.”

“Oh. Never mind then.”

Lenny scribbled in a few final notes before putting away his ledger.

“Alright, Mister Underwood, thank you for your cooperation. Enjoy your stay in Bootsplit.”

“… No Appraisal for the golem?” it couldn’t help but ask.

“This is your personal golem, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then there’s no problem.”

As far as the law was concerned, personal golems were classified as ‘equipment,’ so unless someone reported one stolen or gone rogue there was no reason to bother. Lenny was awfully curious as to where this youngster might have gotten such a fine piece of steel, but knew better than to pry into an adventurer’s personal background. It was bound to be some embellished, long-winded tale with any unflattering details removed in order to make the person telling it look good. Lenny had heard his fair share of such stories, so he opted to save everyone the trouble and pass on being subjected to another one.

Incidentally, the old dwarf’s intuition was spot on – the story Fizzy had prepared to explain her origins was nothing less than a steaming pile of utter bullshit.

“I have another question,” Boxxy continued. “Do you know of any Warlock guilds in town?”

The elderly dwarf blinked in surprise.

“I thought you were headed up north.”

“So?”

“You know all guilds in town are affiliated with the Empire, right? They don’t have branch offices across the border.”

Planning to join a guild just before leaving the country seemed awfully odd, to say the least. People rarely changed guilds after they’d joined, and the few who did were often treated like second-rate adventurers. After all, guilds invested in their members by offering training, specialised equipment and valuable information at very reasonable rates. One of their own jumping ship to take up with a competitor was more often than not considered a form of betrayal. Either that or they were incompetent and had needed to be kicked out, but neither option bode well for the person’s reputation.

“I just want to advance my Job,” Boxxy added. “I’m not interested in joining full-time. I hate politics.”

Xera had prepared this particular response for her master beforehand, as freelance adventurers often showed up requesting Job advancement, and the various guilds were more than happy to take their gold. Provided that the wanderers subjected themselves to a Full Appraisal, of course.

“Ah, so that’s how it is. Well, the Order of the Black Wand has an office on the west side of town, near the market plaza. Try there.”

“I see. Thank you.”

The young elf walked briskly into town, his pet golem following obediently behind.

“Hey Lenny,” one of the guards spoke up. “You said he had no guild affiliation, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“The shoulder patch on that guy’s robes belongs to a guild called the Brotherhood of the Third Eye.”

“You’re sure of this?”

“Pretty sure, aye.”

“Maybe he got kicked out or something?” the second guard joined in. “He did say something about politics, and you know how rowdy disputes between adventurers can get.”

“I don’t know, that doesn’t seem right,” the first scratched his head. “The Brotherhood is a pretty small guild, bunch of local boys, you know? They don’t have the luxury of just kicking people out over trivial stuff like the big ones do.”

“You sure know a lot about an obscure organisation like that, huh?” Lenny couldn’t help but ask. “I mean, I’ve never even heard of them until just now.”

“Well, one of my drinking buddies used to be a member before he retired. He likes to ramble about his glory days, so a lot of the details stuck with me.”

“Want me to call that guy back so we can question him more thoroughly?” the second guard suggested.

“Don’t do anything unnecessary,” Lenny stopped him. “It’s not illegal to change guilds, just unusual. Besides, something tells me that lad has had it rough. You don’t become like *that* unless you’ve been through something terrible.”

The other two nodded. Anyone who willingly revealed that they liked to cover their golem with their ‘bodily fluids’ and then lick them off was undoubtedly not quite right in the head.

“Still, I think I’ll make a note of it, just in case.”

Lenny opened the ledger back up and flipped to the entry for ‘Chester Underwood,’ adding ‘Possible former member of Brotherhood of Third

Eye' in the space reserved for comments and observation.

"Oh damn," muttered the Scribe. "I messed up when writing the guy's details earlier. Guess I was a bit distracted."

He crossed out a word in the ledger, scribbling an amendment in the margin above.

"You're sure about that?" one of the guards asked doubtfully. "Shouldn't you re-do the Appraisal if you messed up?"

"No, it's fine. Just a slip of the hand, I suppose. Heh, that's what I get for doing my job sober."

He put the ledger away with a chuckle.

"After all, there's no way the Appraisal actually said he was 17 fish old."

Part Four

Boxxy headed into the branch office of the Order of the Black Wand. With three floors, it was one of the larger buildings in town, although the interior was still on the cramped side. Overall, it looked to have considerably less total floor space than the two-story Mercenary Guild back in Erosa. Though this was only natural, as the town had barely four-and-a-half thousand people living in it. An outlandishly large building in such a lowly-populated place would be pretty pointless, and the three guilds back in Carran had basically been operating out of old houses, so this was pretty extravagant by comparison.

It wasn't just its size, either. The waiting area immediately beyond the entrance was lavishly decorated, with an air of dignity and class. Plush carpeting lined the entrance and led to the reception desks some eight metres away, while magical lights adorned the walls and ceiling, making the space just bright enough to not be unpleasant despite the lack of windows. The walls were hung with paintings and portraits, and a pair of banners hung like tapestries, bearing the white-on-black guild crest – a stylised fist gripping a wand, framed on either side by an arcane symbol.

Furniture-wise, the place was rather barren. There were a few benches lining the walls and two elevated desks with dwarven clerks sitting behind them, but that was really it. A Quest Board was visible on the far wall directly between the aforementioned desks, and a total of six people waited in line at the counters, each dressed in cloaks and robes of various dark colors.

The Order of the Black Wand was one of the largest Caster guilds in the country, so it made sense that most of their clientele would be of a mystical persuasion. The organisation was also known for handling magical matters of questionable repute, so they predominantly dealt with Warlocks and Necromancers. Not exclusively, though, as they also counted Wizards, Alchemists and Rogues alike among their specialists.

But Boxxy didn't give much of a damn about any of that. All it wanted was to finally get its Warlock Job past Level 25.

However, it was having some difficulty determining which queue it needed to line up at. The one on the left had a brass signpost stamped with the image of a stack of coins, with a rather long word underneath. Looking more closely at the woman at the front of the line, she seemed to be trying to haggle with the clerk about a 'member's discount' of some sort. Judging

by what little Boxxy knew about guilds, it determined that that was the requisitions office – a fancy way of saying ‘guild shop.’ Not where one might inquire about less material services.

The queue on the right was far more promising. Its signpost was decorated with the image of a quill and parchment, implying that it was the administration desk. And what Boxxy needed right now was to have someone administer a Job Advancement, so it immediately got in line to the right.

Immediately in front of Boxxy was a male gnome draped in a black, hooded cloak who looked to be around Fizzy’s age. His face wasn’t visible from the back, but the former mimic’s magical perception told it that there were some nasty burn marks on his right cheek and temple.

But far more interesting than the gnome was the thing floating directly above him. It was a spherical creature about a metre in diameter, with bright red, almost pink, skin covered in considerable bumps and wrinkles. It had one massive purple eye in the middle of its face, underneath which was a large mouth filled with needle-like teeth. Ten tendril-like eyestalks waved from the top, sides and back of its head, almost like errant strands of hair, and each eyeball a different color.

Boxxy’s Demonology Skill identified the creature as a beholder, one most likely bound to the gnome. According to the lore, beholders were demons whose main purpose was not combat, but gathering information through observation. They loved hoarding secrets and knowledge, and typically avoided sharing what they knew.

That didn’t mean that they couldn’t fight, however. Their offensive capabilities may have been lacking, but the various types of eyebeams that they could fire were capable of weakening their target or making them vulnerable to specific elements. They could also erect magical barriers in order to protect their masters, although they generally had to be specifically ordered to do so. Beholders were, like all demons, fickle and selfish creatures that would have loved nothing more than to see their summoner perish so that they could roam the mortal plane freely.

Boxxy stared unabashedly at the beholder as it called up everything it knew about the species. This was only the second time the Mimic had seen a demon other than one of its familiars up close, the first being Punchy, of course. Overcome with curiosity, it probed at the creature’s insides with its magically-enhanced senses, eager to see how it was put together. As

expected, there were barely any internal organs, as most of the body mass was just thick muscle and skull bones. The only things of note were a brain smaller than it would have imagined, a disc-shaped organ at the roof of its mouth and an odd body part that looked like three hourglasses joined at the middle.

Come to think of it, that seemed oddly familiar, especially the way those flesh nodules pulsed and spun. It took a few moments, but Boxxy eventually realised that the thing was the beholder's own Mana Locator Gland, one far more advanced than even a mimic's.

… And the fact that the shapeshifter could 'see' the gland meant that the demon could do the same. In fact, judging by the way the beholder silently turned in mid-air to stare at Boxxy with all eleven eyes, it had most definitely noticed something amiss.

"Well, well, well. What have we here?"

The demon spoke directly into Boxxy's mind with the voice of an old man, hinting at centuries' worth of wisdom. The shapeshifter could also feel a slight disturbance in the mana around it, probably the beholder analysing its body in some way. This was, to put it mildly, not a very tasty situation.

"How quaint!" the demon exclaimed telepathically. "A doppelganger!"

Correction – this was almost as un-tasty as the situation could get.

"I haven't seen one of your kind in centuries! I do so miss the secrecy and conspiracies you lot used to inspire! A pity, really."

Oddly enough, the demon actually sounded jovial and intrigued rather than suspicious. Shouldn't he have alerted his master that there was a monster literally standing behind him?

"Do not fret, young one," he reassured the ex-mimic. "I have no intention of ratting you out to that pathetic gnome. Just the opposite, in fact, I'm rather looking forward to seeing what you intend to do in here."

And now Boxxy just felt silly. It had literally just been musing on the fact demons did not care anything for mortal lives, least of all their master's. There had been no reason to think that this one would be any different. Forget warning the gnome, the beholder was far more likely to simply ask it to gut the fool and leave him unshackled.

"I'm sure you won't mind if I just quietly observe, no?"

The fake elf shook its head lightly in response. If the demon was content to merely analyse its body for the sake of his own curiosity, then Boxxy really had no reason to decline. It did, however, have a very good

reason *not* to decline, as it was likely that the beholder would rat it out if he wasn't allowed to do as he wanted. Boxxy was confident that it could escape if it came to that, but it didn't want to ruin its chance to finally further its Warlock Job by causing an unnecessary ruckus.

"That gland you have there," the demon inquired. "It's not something typically found in doppelgangers, yes?"

Boxxy shook its head.

"The shape and size look familiar… that's a mimic's Mana Locator Gland, is it not?"

The shapeshifter answered with a slight nod.

"Interesting. Are you perchance one of Tal-Saroth's original creations?"

Boxxy had no idea who that was, but considering that it was just one of many mimics born within a low-Level dungeon, the answer to that was a firm 'no.'

"Could it be… a Ranked Up mimic?"

The shapeshifter nodded once again, much to the beholder's delight.

"How unusual! And you're in this place, then that means- Oh, I see! So that's how it is! Wah hah hah hah hah!"

The demon bared his fangs, smiling viciously at the elf. His head bobbed slightly as he laughed.

"Thruumitt!" the gnome whispered angrily. "I told you not to bother anyone in here!"

Though that had indeed been his instruction, Boxxy hadn't been in the building when the order had been given. Meaning that there was technically nothing to prevent Thruumitt from alleviating his boredom by 'bothering' the creature.

"Face the front and close your mouth!"

The demon rolled his near-dozen eyes and turned to face the front.

"Sorry if he creeped you out," the shorter man apologised. "These ancient ones, they're a pain in the ass to keep in line sometimes."

"No worries. It happens."

Of course Boxxy didn't mind. Quite the contrary, it was relieved that its cover seemed to still be intact for the moment. It had after all done nothing to earn the demon's spite, and it wasn't in Thruumitt's nature to reveal a secret willingly. That aside, it was actually rather thankful to the demon, as the conversation had revealed a glaring flaw in its disguise. Namely, that it was only skin deep.

While Boxxy hadn't been able to alter its internal organs as a simple chest mimic, doppelgangers had no such restrictions. They only needed to ensure that their spine remained intact and that they had lungs to breathe with, but other than that almost everything was fair game. There was nothing stopping Boxxy from looking like an elf both inside and out, other than its lack of experience creating internal anatomy. It was confident that it could put up a convincing facade with some practice, though. Elf bodies were almost identical to those of humans, after all, other than a few key differences such as their hearts being located on the right sides of their bodies instead of the left.

And if there was one thing Boxxy T. Morningwood knew, it was human anatomy.

Having made a mental note to work on internal organs later, the shapeshifter moved on to pondering the root cause of the issue. It had grown complacent, thanks to its ability to easily bypass Appraisals and the powerful-yet-flexible new body it had obtained. The events leading up to its capture had taught it the painful lesson that weeks of deception could easily come unravelled with a single slip-up. Plots months or even years in the making could be undone in an instant if it wasn't careful. If it was planning to infiltrate enlightened society for any extended period of time, then the first thing that it needed to practice was not shapeshifting or social skills, but vigilance.

It started working on that right away, double-checking the fake Status that its Essence Concealment was currently broadcasting. Thanks to that, it finally realised that it had accidentally put its fake age as '17 fish,' a leftover from when it had been trying out the limits and flexibility of the Skill. If it wasn't for the gatekeeper's robotic attitude while checking its Status, it was unlikely that it would have even gotten past the gates. Boxxy quickly corrected it to '17 years' and turned its attention to the other problem it had spotted.

Specifically, the eye-shaped insignia on its right shoulder. It hadn't thought much of it initially, but Boxxy now realised that most of the people here bore the Order's crest on their clothes, which was distinctly different from its own. It wasn't sure if this would be a problem, but it knew just who to ask.

"Snack!"

It had told its familiars to hide themselves somewhere beyond the town's borders, just in case something happened and it needed backup.

"What is it, Master?" Xera replied. "Did something happen?"

"Everyone in this guild has the same thing on their shoulder. It doesn't match mine."

"You mean the guild crest?"

"I guess?"

"Not an issue. Just say you left your old guild due to personal reasons and you should be fine. Oh, and try to sound evasive when you say that."

"Ah. What was that guild called, again?"

"Brotherhood of the Third Eye, Master."

"That's a strange name."

"Is it?" Xera asked dubiously. "I think it's a pretty good one, to be honest. Definitely better than 'Order of the Black Wand,' at least."

The shapeshifter supposed that there was no accounting for taste. Although…

"But what about the other two?"

"… Other two what?"

"Isn't there a Brotherhood of the First Eye Master? And one for the Second Eye Master? What if there's a Fourth?"

The succubus sighed through the thought link.

"No, Master, that last part was me addressing you. The guild is called the Brotherhood of the Third Eye."

"Oh… that makes even less sense."

Humans, elves, and the like had only two eyes, so why would they need an organisation dedicated to a nonexistent third one? Were they trying to grow such a thing, perhaps? If that was the case, they should've been the Brotherhood of the Second Heart. That sounded much tastier.

"Next!"

The blonde clerk at the front shouted for the next in line, breaking the creature away from its fantasies. The gnome and its beholder familiar stepped up to the now-empty counter. They spoke briefly about making some kind of appointment, which caused the gnome to become rather irate when it became clear that the person he was looking for had left town the day before. He muttered a few unkind words before leaving in a huff, Thruumitt shooting Boxxy a final pleading look that seemed to say 'please kill this idiot,' as he floated by. The shapeshifter pretended not to notice.

“Next!”

“Hello!”

The not-elf took a few steps forward, greeting the elven clerk cheerfully. The monster was inwardly glad that the receptionist wasn’t human, otherwise its Butcher of Humanity Perk would have made things… difficult.

“Hello there, sir,” she replied with a bright smile to match Boxxy’s. “What can I help you with?”

“I need to see a Warlock trainer.”

“Of course. I will need to confirm a few things. Are you a member of the Order of the Black Wand?”

“No.”

“Do you have any current guild affiliations?”

“No.”

“What about past guild affiliations?”

“Yes.”

“… Which are?”

“Ah, the Brotherhood of the Third Eye,” Boxxy added, showing her its shoulder patch. “I had to leave due to… personal reasons.”

“I understand completely, sir,” she nodded. “Those humans can be quite insufferable sometimes, can’t they?”

“Indeed.”

As expected, Snack’s advice allowed things to go much more smoothly than they would have if it had tried to bumble its way through the interaction by itself.

“Would you be interested in joining our guild, instead?” the clerk offered. “I can’t vouch for other branch offices, but I personally guarantee that we do not tolerate discrimination here, be it racial, sexual or occupational.”

“No, thank you.”

“As you wish, sir. Moving on, I need to inform you that a Full Appraisal will be mandatory before we can perform any kind of Job training. Is that alright?”

“Yes.”

“Good. And lastly – what sort of Warlock training do you need?”

“I need to get past Level 25.”

“Well, you’re in luck, sir. We have a trainer available right now, but we need to discuss the 500 GP training fee before we can proceed.”

“…”

Boxxy hesitated. It hadn’t been stupid enough to think that the service was going to be free, but it hadn’t expected the fee to be quite so steep. Even if they did hike the price up for non-guild members, this felt like a bit much. The receptionist seemed to notice its dilemma and was quick to reassure the potential client.

“I understand that it seems a bit expensive, but please understand that finding a Level 50 Warlock who also has a Level 4 Mentor Skill is rather difficult around these parts. The individual I will be referring you to is also a Scribe, so he is perfectly capable of performing the Appraisal as well.”

She had a point, though not in the way she probably thought. Boxxy didn’t exactly have a lot of options at present, nor did it feel like hunting for them, so it decided to take the financial hit and get this over with.

“Okay, I’ll pay.”

It reached inside its robes and pulled out the heavy coin pouch it had prepared beforehand. Counting out exactly 500 GP worth of coins, it placed them on the counter in front of the goggle-eyed clerk. She had been about to suggest some sort of loan or payment plan, since she certainly hadn’t expected a young lad to be carrying that much gold. Her experienced eyes told her that there was at least four, maybe five times that amount remaining in the pouch. Not the sort of wealth one would expect a random youngster to have access to.

“One moment, please.”

Recovering from the mild shock, she scooped up the coins, storing them away in the strongbox behind the counter. She pulled out a small scrap of paper with a few markings on it and scribbled down some letters and numbers. When she was done, she stamped the parchment with the seal of the Order of the Black Wand and handed it to her client.

“Here you go, sir. Just head through the door on your right and enter the third office on the left. Show this ticket to the bearded gentleman inside and he’ll handle the rest.”

“I see,” Boxxy said, eyeing the door in question.

“Is there anything else you will be needing today?”

“This trainer is a Scribe?”

“He is indeed,” the clerk nodded once again.

“Could he appraise a magic item for me?”

Boxxy was eager to find out the exact properties of the fancy staff it had picked up in the Spire of the Jade King. That was why it had covertly brought it out from its Storage and was currently carrying it in a sturdy shoulder sling. It had wrapped the item in a white sheet so as to not draw too much attention to its clearly-demonic ornamental skull.

“Of course, although that will be a separate charge of 25 GP.”

At least that was more reasonable. Boxxy promptly paid and was given another scrap of paper covered with a bunch of numbers and letters that seemed like gibberish, much like the first one. It was probably some code or shorthand that only the guild’s employees knew. It thanked the woman and moved through the doorway she had pointed out.

The hallway beyond was far less extravagant than the lobby. The walls were bare save for a number of doors, ending in a decrepit-looking staircase. As Boxxy proceeded down the passage it noticed that there was a plaque with some kind of engraved lettering on each door. It couldn’t read what they said, but it could count well enough to know which door was the third on the left.

Having arrived at its destination, it placed a hand on the handle before remembering one of Snack’s basic lessons in etiquette. Mindful of its training, it therefore knocked first.

“Come in!”

A dignified – though slightly muffled – voice came from within, prompting Boxxy to enter the tiny-yet-tidy office. Its only occupant was a grey-bearded dwarf sitting behind a desk in the corner of the room. He wore crisp-looking black robes, and a sleek wooden staff tipped with a golden crystal rested against the wall behind him.

“G’day, laddie,” he offered in greeting. “Name’s Grimebeard, and no, it’s not contagious.”

The dwarf chuckled lightly, his voice oddly vigorous for someone so wrinkled. Boxxy momentarily wondered if it had stumbled onto another Edward, but the rough cough the man’s laughter devolved into said otherwise.

“Ah, sorry about that. So, what can I do fer ye?”

“Yes, hello,” the fake elf returned the greeting. “I’m Chester, and I’m here for some training and an item appraisal.”

It handed Grimebeard the slips of paper the receptionist had given it. The old Warlock looked them over, nodded firmly and put them away in one of his desk drawers. He stood, stepping closer to ‘Chester’ before gesturing at the empty chair in front of his desk.

“Have a seat and we’ll get started.”

Boxxy wasn’t quite sure why sitting was strictly necessary, but it did as instructed and parked its rump on the plain wooden stool, putting the two of them at equal eye level. Grimebeard moved a bit closer and placed a hand on the its forehead, which he certainly couldn’t have done comfortably if the taller ‘elf’ hadn’t taken a seat.

“Full Appraisal.”

Boxxy was expecting to feel the same skin-crawling sensation it had experienced when it had been in captivity, but nothing of the sort happened. It instead felt the odd sensation of something inside itching a bit, signifying that the invasive Full Appraisal had been safely redirected to the smokescreen set up by Essence Concealment.

The divine boon showed Grimebeard a Level 25 Warlock with a rather unbalanced but still perfectly reasonable set of Attributes and Skills. That said, the old Scribe couldn’t help but want to lecture the youngster. Summon Familiar, Power Overwhelming, Demonology and Crystallise Magic were not what he would personally call wise Skill choices, as none of them could protect their wielder from harm. One could argue that having up to three familiars for bodyguards would provide excellent protection, but Grimebeard was of the mind that demons caused more harm than good.

He would’ve gladly given the foolish youth a lecture on the matter, but Skill counselling wasn’t what the elf had come to his office for. Not to mention that he was a guild-less freelancer, and they rarely listened to what anyone else had to say.

“Right, good enough. Just gimme a sec here…”

The dwarf walked back to his desk and quickly jotted down the details of the Full Appraisal, including the Attributes and Skill composition and noting the apparent lack of Perks. He walked back to where Boxxy was sitting and lightly gripped its head once more, this time with both hands.

“Job Advancement: Warlock!”

A pale blue light engulfed the dwarf, flowing through his arms and pouring into the shapeshifter’s head.

[The maximum Level of your Warlock Job has increased to 50.]
[The maximum Level of your Ruin Mastery Skill has increased to 15.]
[The maximum Level of your Domination Mastery Skill has increased to 15.]

This was where Boxxy had expected the notifications to end, but its consciousness was suddenly flooded by a string 'Level up!' messages punctuated with a rather… interesting update.

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 34 Warlock! INT +18. MNT +18. END +18.]
[You have learned a new Spell: True Darkness]
[You have learned a new Spell: Massive Rejection]

"… What?" it said aloud.

"Hm? Something wrong, laddie?"

It was debatable whether 'wrong' was the correct word, but if anyone would know what this was about, it would be a Warlock teacher.

"I just gained a bunch of Job Levels out of nowhere. Is that normal?"

"Ah, yeah, that happens sometimes. Yer Job keeps gathering XP even if it's capped out," Grimebeard explained. "It's not that strange to gain one or two Levels after the cap gets raised if ye've been putting it off fer a long while."

"Oh! That's pretty tas-, I mean, convenient!"

"Eh, not really. Even if it keeps accumulating, the XP ye get this way is hugely reduced. Ye'd probably have gained at two or three times the number of Levels by now if ye had advanced yer Job right away."

The dwarf didn't mind explaining for free since the information was directly related to the elf's request. That, and he wouldn't be able to call himself a teacher if he didn't do *something* to alleviate the boy's criminal cluelessness.

"I see. Thank you."

"Yer welcome, laddie. So, let's see this magic item ye brought."

Boxxy stood, unwrapping the staff on its back to present it to the dwarf. Grimebeard stared wide-eyed, unable to contain his shock at what was clearly a staff of considerable power. He reached out a trembling hand and placed it on the handle.

"Identify, Appraise Item, Detect Enchant," he chanted, his voice quivering.

The staff's information flowed into his mind, a strange glint appearing in his eye as he smiled at the disguised shapeshifter. He opened his mouth, but the young 'Mister Underwood' spoke before he could.

"Bad things will happen if you lie to me, old man."

The poorly-veiled threat immediately halted the dwarf's train of thought. He bit back his words and admitted to himself that this dopey kid was sharper than he looked. The dwarf had been about to try to deceive him that this was merely a decorative walking stick, not even a Caster's staff, and then offer to buy it for a 'good price.'

But his little scheme had been foiled before he could even attempt the cheat. The guild was sure to have his ass on a platter if he was caught falsifying Appraisal results again and he couldn't just attack a client in broad daylight and hope to get away with it. He decided to change his approach.

"I wouldn't dream of it, laddie!" he exclaimed, taking his hand off the staff. "I was just shocked since it is quite the excellent item! Here, let me write the details down for ye!"

The dwarf hurriedly returned to his desk and pulled out a form of some kind, writing down the staff's information. Boxxy carefully observed him as he did so, keeping watch for any more suspicious behavior. It may have been oblivious when it came to matters of social interaction, but it was an expert in the field of greed, and certainly hadn't failed to notice the way the dwarf was blatantly coveting its fancy staff.

Even if it wasn't particularly shiny, it was still the shapeshifter's property, which meant that anyone who dared to lay a finger on it would have their face eaten. It was debating doing that anyway, but, much like his would-be victim, realised that this was neither the time nor the place for violence.

Once Grimebeard was done, he handed the sheet of paper to Boxxy, who glanced it over while nodding to itself.

Yup, can't read a single word of it.

Its ability to read and write was still practically non-existent, so it simply rolled up the appraisal results and stowed them inside its robes. Snack or Fizzy should be able to tell it what the paper said, although its validity was obviously questionable. Boxxy hadn't even been planning to have the staff appraised here, but it had seen the opportunity and taken it, much to its regret. Deciding it would be good to get a second opinion, it

rewrapped the clearly-valuable item, slung it over its shoulder and proceeded to leave the building.

Grimebeard sat in silence for about a minute after the door to his office slammed shut. Once he had made sure that the elf was gone and that nobody was listening in, he reached under his desk, pulling out a crystalline blue cube about eight centimetres on all sides. He tapped the topmost side three times and it flashed in response. He brought it up to his face and started whispering into it.

"Iretta. Chosoros. Elemus. Crokara. Ronbus. Epiporia. Afurte. Mekon."

Having received the correct keywords, the cube flashed again and its insides flickered to life. It kept blinking for several seconds before projecting a slightly-transparent three-dimensional image directly in front of Grimebeard's face. It took a few moments for the hologram to stabilise, whereupon it took the form of a hooded head and shoulders.

"You're contacting us way ahead of schedule."

The words that came from the cube were slightly distorted, but nevertheless understandable.

"I know, but I have an urgent job for you. One that both of us are bound to profit from."

After all, it wasn't every day that an Artifact-grade item crossed Grimebeard's desk, and he wasn't about to let some snot-nosed runt run off with it so easily.

Part Five

Boxxy, still under the guise of Chester Underwood, strode through the heavy doors of the Bootsplit Craftsman's Union. It was an artisan's guild, the local 'flavour' of the organisation that Fizzy still technically belonged to. Most towns and cities within the Lodrak Empire had one of these Unions, but they weren't structured in the same way as the Order of the Black Wand. Rather than a singular entity with multiple branch offices, they were instead a collection of fully autonomous guilds that worked closely together.

This was necessary because every region and settlement had its own specialty goods and products, not to mention the difference in available raw materials and trade routes. It was far easier to have each division regulate themselves and make their own guild policies than have a central authority handling administration for the entire country. Adventurer guilds like the Order or the Mercenary Guild could get away with it because their members tended to travel a lot and having a certain standard and sense of familiarity was important to them. Artisans, on the other hand, rarely moved shop once they had established themselves, so their only concerns were local connections and services.

None of that mattered to Boxxy, however. It was neither an adventurer nor an artisan. The most accurate term to sum up its occupation would be 'murder hobo.' However, it did have things that it wanted appraised, and this was the best place for it. The only reason that it had even attempted to do that at the Order was because the opportunity had presented itself. It was slightly regretting ignoring Fizzy's warning that the Order of the Black Wand was full of shady and untrustworthy people, but, in Boxxy's defence, it was fairly shady and untrustworthy itself.

Speaking of the golem, she was supposed to be here ordering supplies, and yet she was nowhere to be seen. In fairness, though, this place was a lot bigger than the Order's office. About the size of an extra-large barn, to be precise. Fizzy might simply have gone into one of the several workshops on the premises. Deciding to ask around, Boxxy approached one of the unoccupied clerks, a middle-aged dwarf wearing half-moon spectacles and a clean white-and-grey striped shirt. He was busy scribbling at something behind his desk and didn't seem to notice the ginger elf's approach.

"Hello there," the shapeshifter greeted the gentleman in an effort to get his attention.

“Oh! Hello, sir,” the man responded. “What can I help you with?”

“I’m looking for a steel golem. Looks like a female gnome, has a shield attached to her left hand?”

“Who’s asking?”

“I am.”

The man appeared supremely unamused.

“Don’t be a smart-arse, just gimme your name, lad.”

“Oh. Chester Underwood.”

“Ah, you’re the owner it mentioned. Fine piece of equipment you got there, if you don’t mind me saying.”

“Thanks, but can you tell me where she is?”

“Should be through those doors over there,” he pointed to the far left of the lobby. “Our smiths are currently fulfilling your order and it insisted on observing them. Should be a bit longer before they’re done.”

The ‘order’ in question was for Artificer parts, an entire crate’s worth. They were necessary for Boxxy’s tinkering practice, so it had told Fizzy to have plenty made as quickly as possible. Though it had told the gate guard that it would linger for a few days, it ideally wanted to be in and out as quickly as possible.

“I’ll leave that to her, then,” the false elf declared. “Meanwhile, I’d like to have some things appraised.”

“Oh? What kind?”

“Magic items. From a dungeon.”

“Really?” the dwarf raised an eyebrow. “Dungeon diving? At your age?”

“I had strong allies.”

“Fair enough. We actually have a few people available who can take care of that.”

“Any of them not human?”

The clerk sighed in exasperation. Though he certainly understood why racial tensions between elves and humans existed, that didn’t mean that he particularly liked it.

“Hold on, I’ll call them over.”

He pushed a button on his desk and a buzzing noise came from somewhere in the back. A few moments later a female elf in her late twenties came from the door behind the desk. She had dark green hair styled in a no-nonsense ponytail with eyes to match, and her slender,

elegant figure was wrapped in an expensive-looking white and gold garment that looked more like an evening gown than a robe.

"Hi there," she greeted Boxxy and the clerk. "What's up, Holt? Who's your friend?"

"Hey Alea, this is Chester," Holt replied. "Lad here needed some magic items appraised."

"I see. Follow me, please."

"Shouldn't I pay first?" Boxxy asked.

Alea shook her head.

"We'll charge you for everything once we're done."

"Oh, alright."

The elf woman led Boxxy through the same door she had exited just moments ago, guiding it through a series of corridors before they arrived at her office. It was much bigger than Grimebeard's, presumably because it also doubled as a workshop of sorts. Various ingredients, materials and weapons were organised neatly atop a stone counter that almost resembled an altar – a notion reinforced by the glowing sigils and runes etched into it.

"That's just my enchanting station," the woman explained when she noticed her guest staring. "Forgive the mess, I was just taking a break from a bulk order."

She sat down on the plush couch in the room's open area and invited 'Chester' to sit in the armchair opposite her. Boxxy obliged, though it had to remove its staff from the sling over its shoulder in order to do so.

"I see you're a magic user," she said with a businesslike smile. "Let me guess, Warlock?"

"Yes," the shapeshifter admitted, mildly surprised. "How'd you know?"

"Your type likes to wear red or purple robes like yours, I've noticed. Now, enough small talk. What would you like appraised?"

"This."

Boxxy raised the staff in its arms, much to the surprise of the woman sitting opposite it.

"I got it recently from a dungeon," it added. "I need to know what it does."

"I understand. Then, if you'll allow me."

She held her hands out as if asking to be passed the staff. Boxxy hesitated a bit, but this place seemed a lot more reputable than the Order so it reluctantly handed it over.

CLUNK

Only to have the metal staff slip from her fingers and go crashing to the floor.

"Oh, darn it! I am so sorry," she apologised immediately. "I didn't think it would be so heavy after seeing you handle it so easily."

The casual comment sent Boxxy's internal thoughts into panic mode. Of course, a feeble magic user shouldn't be able to carry this thing. Even Snack couldn't lift it, and she was a demon. Granted, all other things being equal succubi were physically weaker than adult humans, but that didn't change the fact that Boxxy had messed up.

"Guess you must be stronger than you look under those robes."

Struck by a moment of inspiration at Alea's comment, the doppelganger subtly shifted the flesh underneath its baggy clothing.

"Yes!" it nodded. "Want to see?"

"There's no need to- oh, my!"

The elf had barely spoken before Boxxy opened its robes to reveal a set of rippling abs and bulging pecs. It was the kind of well-developed, nearly fiend-like musculature that would have benefitted greatly from even the tiniest bit of Strength (STR). Certainly not the sort of body one would expect to see on a stereotypical seventeen-year-old elven Spell-slinger, but Alea didn't seem bothered at all. Quite the opposite, actually.

"Can I… touch them?"

'Chester' nodded, and she leaned forward, extending her arm hesitantly. She placed her slender fingers on its ripped body, slowly trailing them up and down the delightfully-firm muscles.

She found herself attracted to the masculine display not just because that was the sort of thing she was into. That was a big part of it, but it was also the fact that this beefcake's three-digit Charisma (CHR) score was specifically designed to reel her in even deeper.

"Ack! I apologise!" she pulled her hand back suddenly. "I don't know what came over me."

"It's no problem."

"Then could you, uh, put those away now?"

Boxxy donned its clothes once more, satisfied that its brilliant ruse had worked. Alea, on the other hand, coughed into her clenched fist in an attempt to dispel what she perceived as an awkward atmosphere.

"In any event, could I ask you to hold that up for me?"

The shapeshifter did as she requested, allowing her to appraise the item without having to bear its weight. Much like the dwarf before her, her reaction was rather extraordinary.

"My word!" she exclaimed in awe. "You have yourself an Artifact there!"

"A what-now?"

"You don't know what an Artifact is?!"

"I… had an unpleasant encounter with a demon recently and forgot some things."

Boxxy had internally classified this response as 'Ignorance Excuse B.'

"Oh, I see. No worries, I'll explain everything. Let me just get a form."

A short trip to her desk and a quick bout of scribbling later she returned to her seat on the couch. She patted the cushion next to her, inviting Chester to get a better look at the piece of paper in her hands, an offer it readily accepted.

Name: Voidcaller
Maker: Sthulmir Grarabraarm
Type: Staff
Quality: Artifact
Offense: C
Defense: E+
Durability: AA+
Magic Amplification: 10% All, 20% Dark
Enchantments: Greater Channelling, Greater Intelligence, Lesser Magic Resistance, Reduced Weight, Innate Ability
Estimated Value: Priceless
Notes:
An adamantite greatstaff containing the essence of a powerful demon, likely its creator. Strong connection to the Beyond; only those who have embraced such eldritch energies are capable of truly harnessing its potential. Heavier than other weapons of its type, requiring a good deal of physical strength to wield properly.

Unfortunately, it hadn't learned to read in the past half hour, so none of that made any sense to it. It could, however, recognise the shapes well enough to tell that a lot of the letter and number combinations were the same as the ones that that Grimebeard fellow had given it. Barring the difference in handwriting, of course. That meant that the dwarf had actually

been truthful, but that did little to help Boxxy comprehend the information it had been given.

"Can you explain everything from the top, just in case?"

"Of course," Alea agreed. "So, the name of the item and its maker at the top are pretty straightforward. I have to say, though, this is the first time I've ever seen a name like this. I'm not sure I can even pronounce it."

"Must be a demon's name," Boxxy remarked. "How did you know who made it, though?"

"Most magic items are imprinted with meta-magical data. Think of it as a label that any Scribe can read, but nobody else can see."

"Ah. Handy. What's next?"

She continued, pointing out the words as she moved down the page.

"That's the item's Type, its official classification. It tells you what Skills and Masteries best work with it, this one clearly being a staff."

"Isn't that kinda obvious? I mean I got Staff Mastery when I hit stuff with it."

Which, in turn, had given the pretend-elf a small but not-unwelcome boost of STR and END.

"Sometimes it can be hard to tell right away," Alea shrugged. "It doesn't hurt to spell it out anyway, so we put it on all our appraisal result forms."

"Makes sense."

"Up next we have the item's quality rating, in this case a staggeringly powerful Artifact-grade item."

"Oh! You mean like Superior?"

She hummed lightly.

"Yes, and no. This one is much higher. Want me to go over them all?"

"I would appreciate it," the shapeshifter nodded.

The elf touched briefly upon the nine tiers on which items were graded based on performance. At the bottom were Unusable and Poor quality, which were mostly trash, followed by Good, Fine and Superior. Boxxy was aware of these tiers, as it had hit all of them when creating items with its Artificer Job. Superior was also the highest quality items that most common adventurers could hope to get their hands on.

Masterwork-class items were one step above Superior, and were usually created through the cooperation of multiple skilled craftsmen. For instance, a master Blacksmith might make a brilliant war axe graded Superior, then find an Enchanter to imbue it with magical properties in order to upgrade it

to a Masterwork. There were also extremely talented individuals out there who could create a Masterwork entirely by themselves, but this required true mastery of one's craft and only the absolute finest raw materials.

It was also the highest ceiling that the vast majority of artisans could hope to hit, as it took exceptionally special circumstances to create Artifact-ranked gear. These were truly unique items that could never be replicated, let alone mass-produced, so it was safe to say that Boxxy's staff, which Alea helpfully revealed was called 'Voidcaller,' was the only one of its kind.

Yet, extraordinary as that was, there were two tiers above even that, namely Phantasmal and Divine, each class significantly rarer and more powerful than its predecessor. If the Artifacts in circulation around the world numbered only a few hundred, then there were only twenty or thirty Phantasmal items. Boxxy *really* wanted to get its tentacles on one of those, but it would appear that their owners were insanely powerful individuals far above its current power level.

The ultimate in equipment, Divine items, were unfortunately nothing but a pipe dream. They were shrouded in myths and legends, said to have been forged by the gods themselves. It was speculated there were only nine in existence – one for each member of Terrania's pantheon – but history suggested that even that was a generous estimate. According to Alea, only three of the nigh-mythical items had been recorded in the Lodrak Empire's six and a half centuries of history.

"And two of them were so powerful that they sparked armed conflicts with other nations," she concluded. "Then again, this is the Empire we're talking about, so those wars could've been fought over anything."

"Very interesting," Boxxy commented. "You sure know a lot about stuff."

"Well, I am a Scribe, after all," the elf smiled, tucking her green hair behind a pointy ear. "I wouldn't be able to accurately evaluate items if I didn't know a fair bit of everything."

Indeed, if the Scribe doing the appraisals wasn't knowledgeable in a great number of fields, then the results of their analysis would be inconclusive at best, outright misleading at worst. That was why Boxxy couldn't have just asked that guy at the gate to inspect its gear.

"So, what's next on the list?" 'Chester' inquired.

"Right. Next, we have the offensive, defensive and durability ratings: how much damage the item can deal, prevent, or withstand, respectively.

Voidcaller's offense is at C, meaning that it's about as damaging as an unenchanted steel war hammer, and defensively it's at E+, which is pretty terrible. Not surprising, since you can't block much with it and it has nothing to diffuse the impact of a blow."

"So… it's a terrible weapon?"

"Relatively, yes, but still better than the double-Fs most staves receive in that category. Oh, and I should mention that the offensive rating is purely in terms of physical damage. The staff's ability to boost magic is not factored into it."

"Alright. And what does the durability rating mean?"

"Double-A plus means that it's practically indestructible. Like, a dragon could probably step on this thing and it would barely make a dent. I mean, it's made of adamantite."

Now there was a word Boxxy was familiar with. To its knowledge, adamantite was considered the ultimate metal in both hardiness and weight. It had assumed that the material would be shinier, though, not this thoroughly unappetising pitch-black.

"Next, we have magic amplification," the elf continued. "Ten percent to all Spells and twenty percent to darkness-based Spells is *extremely* good, by the way. You don't see these kinds of numbers on anything below Artifact. At least, not at the same time."

"Is it just Spells? Does it amplify Skill damage, too?"

"Yes, assuming that they directly deal elemental damage," she nodded.

This was good to know, as damaging Skills didn't scale with INT in the same way that Spells did. That meant that they would likely only fall behind its other means of killing as Boxxy's Level continued to climb. Admittedly, at present that applied only to Acid Spray, but it was nonetheless good information to have when considering future Skill choices.

"Next, you have your passive enchantments," Alea stated, beginning to list them off. "Greater Channelling cuts ten percent off your Spell costs. Greater Intelligence is a passive boost of twenty-five INT points. Lesser Magic Resistance reduces all magic damage taken by five percent. Reduced Weight makes the item three times lighter, which is kind of necessary for adamantite gear. I doubt even your… powerful arms… could lift this thing without that."

Feeling a bit daring, she decided to test the waters by throwing an arm around Chester's shoulder. Boxxy was at first rather confused by her action,

but it quickly remembered one of Snack's lessons. Handshakes, salutes, waves and other hand-based gestures were meant to be reciprocated, firmly whenever possible. As such, it returned the gesture and held Alea tightly, causing her to blush.

"Th-the, um, the Innate Ability," she tried to continue, "it's like an item-based Skill, something unique to Artifacts and higher, but not all have one."

"Oh? What's mine do?"

"I'm not sure, but you can find out by activating it."

"How do I do that?"

"Typically, you grab the item and start channeling your mana into it until it's fully charged, at which point it should activate and- What are you doing?"

Before Alea could stop it, Boxxy had stood from the couch, gripping Voidcaller with both hands. Fizzy had already taught it how to channel its mana when she had showed it how to use a mana-fuelled welding torch, but it hadn't even considered trying to use it with the un-shiny thing. And now that it tried, it discovered that the staff was *thirsty*.

"C-could you not do anything unnecessary?!"

Boxxy ignored her complaints and channelled precisely 666 MP into the weapon. The ornamental skull's jawbone rattled as though it were trying to come alive, its four jeweled eye sockets glowing intensely. At first, nothing seemed to happen, but it was suddenly struck by the strangest urge to summon something. Deciding to see the experiment through, it dismissed Snack, then activated Summon Familiar to bring her back.

But what transpired next differed vastly from the usual spinning concentric circles of light. Instead, a number of things happened at almost exactly the same time, starting with the appearance of an oval-shaped portal of bright red energy directly in front of Boxxy. A gust of wind followed, strong enough to scatter most of Alea's paperwork and belongings around her office workshop. A blue-skinned succubus fell through the person-sized interdimensional doorway, landing in confused disorientation on the nearby coffee table.

The arcane energy and erratic air currents faded a few moments later, less than a second after the whole thing had begun.

"What! The fuck! Are you doing!" Alea finally managed to shriek.

"Uh… testing?" the not-an-elf replied dumbly.

“You don’t just do that in someone’s workplace!” she continued shouting. “Especially not-”

“Ugh… Master?” Xera grumbled, rising to her feet.

“Is that a succubus?! Really?!”

“She’s my familiar. She burns things real good.”

“I don’t care! I want you to-!”

“Sleep.”

Xera did what she did best and pacified the situation through underhanded means, putting the woman under her Spell. Alea collapsed on the couch, and Xera busily began altering her short-term memories with her Dreamweaver Skill. She didn’t even have to ask what was going on, as she knew her master well enough to understand the gist of it.

“Snack. Tell me what this says.”

Boxxy shoved the appraisal report in front of her face and she read the whole thing out for it as she continued to mess with the elf woman’s brain. She was a skilled multitasker though, so she was able to give it the information it wanted without any issue. Once everything was settled, she was sent back to the Beyond so that her box-brained master could resume its meeting a few seconds prior to everything going to shit.

… Business as usual, in other words.

“C-could you not do anything unnecessary?” the elf repeated herself after abruptly waking up.

“I apologise, I got a bit excited,” Boxxy bowed its head, then sat back down.

“It’s not as though I don’t understand, but please keep your surroundings in mind.”

“Of course. I’ll test this later in a safer space.”

And when it did, it would realise that Voidcaller had the ability to summon either of its familiars instantly and at only a fraction of the MP cost. And despite spending significantly less MP on conjuring their bodies, both Snack and Arms would still arrive at full strength with no apparent negative side effects, other than a brief moment of disorientation. It was an ability best used in emergency situations, in which one or both of its familiars died in combat. However, it would have to be used sparingly, as Voidcaller’s summoning empowerment could only be activated once every two hours.

Once it had finished testing the Artifact's limits, Boxxy would finally start to question how, exactly, it had come into possession of the staff. It was so perfect for the shapeshifter's peculiar take on the Warlock Job that it almost felt as though it had been custom made just for it. If this had happened earlier, it would have attributed its acquisition to good fortune and that would have been the end of it. However, it was currently beholden to a Goddess of Chance, so it couldn't help but ponder the possibility of interference on her part. Indeed, it would be impossible not to at least suspect Willy's involvement in the matter, considering that it was his recruitment that had set the whole thing into motion.

Then again, as the god himself had said, a prediction was not the same as a prophecy. There existed in all things an element of randomness and uncertainty, and no outcome was truly one hundred percent certain. He had also mentioned that he despised having to interfere directly, since that would make things boring, and the entertainment value had been her only reason for making Boxxy her Hero in the first place. Therefore, it was also plausible that the 'ganger acquiring the first of hopefully many Artifacts was nothing more than blind luck.

The fact was, it was ultimately pointless to question whether something had happened by pure chance or due to some divine plan devised by Boxxy's patron deity. And honestly, the two things were completely indistinguishable whenever Ernesto was involved, anyway. It was impossible to come to a definite conclusion one way or the other, and Boxxy would eventually just accept the magic stick and move on with its life.

Such mental gymnastics were for the future, however. Right now, the shapeshifter had a far more pressing question.

"So, the estimated value says 'priceless.' Does that mean that I can sell it for infinite money?"

"… Hah! Hahaha! Ahh, that was a good one," the elf forced a laugh. "No, silly. It just means that you literally can't put a price on something like this. You'd have to auction it off if you ever wanted to sell it, but I wouldn't if I were you. Even if you receive enough money to set yourself up for life, you'd never get another like it."

Boxxy wasn't entirely sure what to think about that.

"… Can you appraise another item for me?"

"Of course, Chester. I'd be delighted to."

“Hold on, let me go get it.”

It left the office in a bit of a hurry, leaving Alea alone with her thoughts. Now that she was no longer distracted by the strangely-hunky youngster, she couldn’t help but notice that things seemed a little off. Although Snack and Boxxy had done their best to put everything back to where it had been while she’d been asleep, they had failed to do a very good job of it. Thankfully, the false elf returned before the Scribe could put two and two together, dragging a ridiculous-looking thing along by the shoulder.

“Hi, I’m back,” it said casually.

“I can see that. And what, uh, have you got there?”

“This is Fizzy. She’s my golem. She talks.”

“Hi,” the steel Paladin said dully, giving the woman a lazy wave.

“Oh, that’s the one everyone’s been losing their marbles over, huh?” Alea stood to take a closer look. “She does look extremely lifelike. Wait, is this the item you wanted appraised?”

“No, just the shield,” Boxxy clarified.

“Look, can we get this over with?” Fizzy demanded. “Those idiots down there don’t know a bi-directional spark-plug from a Hopperback connector circuit, and I do not trust them to handle that order by themselves.”

“Sure, I’ll be just a moment. Care to show me the- ooooooookay! That’s a cursed item, isn’t it?”

She had barely even had to look at the article to guess what was wrong with it.

“It is. That’s why I’m having the gnome use it. Golem!” Boxxy quickly corrected itself. “I meant golem. Not gnome.”

“Ugh, whatever. Just… let me see it.”

Alea seemed unwilling to touch the profane object for even the few seconds necessary to complete the evaluation, but she forced herself to do it. Once the examination was complete, she headed to the sink next to her enchanter’s station to scrub her hands thoroughly while Fizzy returned to the smithy. The elf took another appraisal form and filled it out before presenting it to Boxxy.

Name: Left Hand of the Forsaken Sentinel
Maker: Unknown
Type: Plate Armour
Quality: Artifact

Offense: D
Defense: B+
Durability: A
Magic Amplification: None
Enchantments: Enhanced Durability, Self-Repair, Well Fitted, Lesser Lightning Resistance, Curse of the Steelshaper
Estimated Value: Priceless
Notes:
An ancient gauntlet from an age long past, forged from mithril-enriched steel alloy and fortified with magic. Supremely well-crafted, has survived the passage of time as well as numerous battles with no permanent damage. A terrible power dwells within, for it still bears the grudge of its former wielder.

The creature was only slightly less clueless this time around, as it already knew what each field said, as well as the shape of at least some of the words. It was able to recognise that there was no 'Innate Ability' to the gauntlet, which was unfortunate, though it was still 'Priceless,' at the very least. As far as the enchantments went, Alea was kind enough to explain each of them, as she had done with the staff.

"Enhanced Durability and Self Repair do exactly what they say. They're a common combination for armour pieces since they improve their effectiveness, longevity, and reduce maintenance. Well Fitted allows it to adjust its size to fit the wearer – within reason, of course. Lesser Lightning Resistance is also self-explanatory, but this Curse of the Steelshaper… I've never seen anything like it before. Do you know anything about it?"

"Not really," Chester shrugged. "Just that it's what makes Fizzy so… lifelike."

"Hmm, I see. You may want to have her control rod examined, just in case. Wouldn't want a rogue golem stabbing you in the back."

"Noted."

"Will that be everything, then?" the elf asked with a coy smile.

"Actually, there is one more item I'd like you to take a look at. Two, actually."

Boxxy pretended to reach under its cloak and stealthily retrieved its trusty mithril daggers from its Storage. Alea was both disappointed and relieved that her bizarre client had produced a reasonable item for once. The appraisal results showed no surprises, either.

Name: Mithril Dirk, SN 22-15
Maker: Hurak Halfbelt
Type: Dagger
Quality: Superior
Offense: B
Defense: D+
Durability: A
Magic Amplification: 3% All
Enchantments: None
Estimated Value: 550 GP
Notes:
A long thrusting dagger forged from pure mithril by the dwarven smiths of Einharvel. It boasts superior sharpness and durability.

"As you can see," the elf stated, scooting closer to Chester, "it's a very basic, but reliable weapon. The other one's pretty much identical, so I didn't bother writing both of them up."

"What about these numbers up here?" Boxxy pointed to the page.

"Oh, that's just a serial number. Mass-produced weapons don't get fancy names like 'Voidcaller' or 'Left Hand of the Forsaken Sentinel,' just an identifier that can be tracked in case it was stolen or used to commit crimes."

That would hardly be a concern for Boxxy, since the daggers' previous owner wasn't in any position to report them stolen. That said, there was no telling what might happen if their original wielder did come looking for them, so it was probably best that the former mimic not flaunt them overmuch in public.

"You know, I could enchant those for you," Alea offered. "I'm quite good at it, if I do say so myself."

That certainly sounded enticing, but there was one problem. An enchantment could not be removed once bound to an item, and the process carried the risk of breaking the item completely if too much mana were poured into it. That was why durable or magic-conductive materials like adamantite or mithril were necessary for top-tier enchanted equipment. Regardless, Boxxy was wary of letting this random stranger do unpredictable things to its shiny knives, so it politely declined.

"No."

Or at least, as polite as a four-month-old monster could be under the circumstances.

"A pity," the elf said lazily, brushing her hair back. "Then is there anything else I can do for you? Some… special service?"

"I already said I don't want enchantments."

"What about something more… physical?"

Boxxy was honestly baffled.

"What, like training?"

"Hmmm… you could call it that. I certainly have a lot to teach a young stud like you," she cooed while stroking Chester's inner thigh. "Things only an experienced woman would know."

Did she mean Spells? Was she offering to teach it magic? Or maybe some kind of little-known trick?

"Could you be more specific?"

Alea smiled and leaned into the false elf's ear, whispering a number of naughty things that finally helped the dense creature to realise what she was getting at. It naturally had no intention of taking part in any promiscuous activities, nor had it been consciously broadcasting any such inclinations, so it had no idea how things had come to this.

Now that the situation had arisen, however, its cunning wit spied an opportunity. If succubi like Snack could use lust as a tool, then what was stopping it from doing the same? 'Chester' had something Alea wanted, which meant that this was an opportunity to secure some profit.

"What's in it for me?" it asked bluntly.

After all, give-and-take was one of the fundamental building blocks of society.

"Oh, a shrewd one, are you? Tell you what, you help me scratch my itch and take my mind off my troubles, and I'll waive your Appraisal fees."

Was that a good deal? Come to think of it, Boxxy had neglected to inquire as to price in the first place. If it was 25 GP as per the Order's branch, then the total would come to an even hundred. However, it was likely that this establishment charged more, considering that everything in the place looked markedly expensive. Even then, this probably wouldn't be worth its time unless it took Alea's offer of 'tutelage' seriously instead of interpreting it as her being coy.

"Alright, let's do it."

Which was precisely the sort of misunderstanding had taken place.

Once the deed was done, ‘Chester Underwood’ returned to the lobby to find Fizzy waiting for it. The steel golem was sitting cross-legged on the floor next to a sealed wooden crate big enough to fit at least three of her. Her statuesque stillness ended abruptly when she noticed Boxxy’s approach, prompting her to stand and throw her arms into the air in exasperation.

“Finally!” she exclaimed. “What took you so long?”

The golem’s attitude was entirely justified, as she had been told that they were in a hurry and had rushed things as a result. If she had known that she’d have some extra time on her hands, she would have put it into making sure her work order was completed to a slightly higher standard.

“I was learning about stuff,” the ‘elf’ replied curtly.

“Oh. Well, at least it was productive.”

Truth be told, Boxxy would probably still be going if Alea hadn’t passed out from exhaustion. She’d kept screaming ‘More! Do me more!’ so often that her voice had started to go hoarse. It was a miracle that nobody had come to check on her with all that yelling, but the elf had likely soundproofed her office.

Still, as promised, Boxxy had indeed learned something from the encounter. The elf had taught it a number of interesting techniques that would no doubt come in useful if something like this were to happen again. It would just need to keep in mind that, looking back, two hours of non-stop pounding was probably overdoing it.

“Whatever, can we please get a move on? It’s already evening.”

“Sure.”

“Can you help me carry this, though? It’s not all that heavy, but it’s awfully unwieldy.”

The golem grabbed the crate by one end and Boxxy took the other as the two of them proceeded to head out of the Union building and into the street.

“By the way, did you find out if you can get your Paladin Job advanced?” the shapeshifter asked matter-of-factly.

That was one of the things that the golem had been supposed to accomplish, along with procuring its Artificer supplies. She had been given a bag of gold to that end and told to not cause any trouble with the trainers, then to wait at the Bootsplit Craftsman’s Union until Boxxy returned.

“I did better than that!” Fizzy exclaimed. “I’m now a Level 28 Paladin!”

"Wait, you got past the Full Appraisal already?"

"Yep!"

"How?!"

There were more than a few out-of-place things on her Status, so Boxxy had been certain that she would be denied outright. It had at least been unlikely that anyone would have attacked her, since these people seemed far more accepting of a talking golem than it had honestly anticipated. Which was the only reason that it had allowed her to roam around by herself in the first place.

"I told the Paladin trainer how my life was saved by the obscure God of Probability, which is why I champion his name in return," she explained. "I also fed him and his mates a line about how 'bearing this horrible curse is penance for my past sins' or whatever."

"And that worked?"

"Oh yeah, they ate that shit up! I just listened to Snack's advice about how those righteous types were suckers for self-sacrifice and repaying debts, and it was spot-on. Oh, right! Here's the leftover money you gave me! Thanks ever so much!"

Fizzy pulled a coin pouch from her trousers and handed it to Boxxy with a wide smile.

"… There's more gold left over than I would have thought," it noted.

"Yeah, I got a good price for the parts since I'm technically still a member of Erosa's Craftsman's Union. They even offered me a position as Artificer instructor, but I had to turn them down."

"I see. What about the Paladin training fee?"

"Well, that did cost quite a bit, but the people over there were super-impressed by my sob story and glorious steel frame, so I got it discounted from 230 to 200 GP."

"*GEH!*"

Boxxy nearly spat with rage. What was with this unfair treatment?! Why was Paladin training less than half the price of Warlock training? Such blatant favouritism and discrimination surely had to be against the rules!

But, on the other hand, that did mean that Boxxy hadn't had to shell out a whole 1,000 GP for training. The cost reduction on both the Job advancement and the Artificer components was definitely a good thing, especially since it had accepted those only begrudgingly as necessary expenses for getting stronger. Honestly, if gold coins hadn't been so

wonderfully shiny it wouldn't have batted an eye at spending so many, though most of the time it didn't have much choice. One typically had to use the power of money if they wanted to obtain something in civilised society, and money just happened to be shiny.

And, speaking of society, the immediate populace was currently taking a healthy amount of interest in the newcomer and its pet golem. There was a plethora of people staring at the odd duo as they walked down the street, which was the exact opposite of the 'blending in.' The massive crate rattling with their every step wasn't exactly helping matters, so they ducked inside a small, quiet alley, away from prying eyes.

After making sure that nobody was peeping or eavesdropping, Boxxy quickly stuffed the parts inside the crate into its Storage. It also took the opportunity to re-summon Xera, though the succubus seemed strangely displeased about something. Neither the golem nor the 'ganger cared enough to ask her about it, however. She was told instead to suck it up and conceal her demonic identity, which she did by assuming the guise of a nondescript elven adventurer eerily similar to Alea. Boxxy wanted her available should a fight break out, and while Warlocks walking around with their familiars may not have been illegal, it was still heavily frowned upon. Not to mention that it wasn't particularly subtle.

The ex-mimic had decided that it would leave town ahead of schedule. After all, it had already accomplished everything it had wanted to do here, and lingering was pointless. Dangerous, even. Fizzy's Full Appraisal would have left a record of her name, serving as undeniable proof that she had passed through the town. Even if Appraisal results were supposed to be strictly confidential, someone with an important-sounding title like 'Spymaster' was sure to get ahold of them eventually.

But it appeared that plans to leave would have to be slightly delayed. First, it would have to deal with the strangers blocking the alley's exit. There were five male dwarves, all clad in matching light armour with strange tattoos around their eyes and on their cheeks, not to mention that they were quite well-armed. The two identical fellows on the left held compact crossbows that were already loaded, and the one on the far right was unhooking a pair of axes from his hip. Meanwhile, his friend immediately next to him was licking the blade of his dagger, which he probably thought looked intimidating, but the only thing the gesture did was make Boxxy wonder if the steel knife was tasty.

The dwarf in the middle – the one carrying a large, two-handed axe on his shoulder, likely the leader of this little posse – took a few steps forward.

"Pardon me a moment, sir," he called with mock politeness, "but would you be willing to donate to the Bootsplit Charity Drive for Starving Orphans?"

The false elf stared dumbly at the odd little man, unable to comprehend what he was talking about.

"… I don't follow," it eventually responded.

The thug-in-chief flashed an evil grin, showing a few gilded teeth.

"It's no big deal. We're just going relieve you of your excess baggage in order to help those in need. Namely, myself and my compatriots."

The other four chuckled grimly, but their leader's roundabout way of speaking had only served to confuse Boxxy further.

"Excuse me, Master," Xera spoke through the telepathic link, "but I do believe that these people are trying to take your shinies."

"You're trying to rob me?" Boxxy asked the would-be-thieves incredulously.

"That's such a nasty way of putting it," the leader shook his head. "'Mandatory donation' sounds so much better, in my opinion."

"Oh, how nice!" exclaimed Boxxy, to the surprise of everyone present.

"Really?" Fizzy couldn't help but ask. "How is any of this 'nice?'"

"I've never been mugged before," was the cheerful reply. "I always wondered what it would be like."

The thug's attitude turned sour when he saw his mark's carefree attitude. The information he had been given had said that the guy was a clueless Warlock with more money than brains, so he'd wanted to toy with the boy a little. However, he had underestimated just how idiotic the elf truly was. The whelp clearly had no idea how deep the shit he was currently in truly ran.

"You two," he murmured to the dwarves on his right. "Fire a couple warning shots. Into his face."

The crossbow-wielding twins didn't hesitate, firing a bolt each at the smiling elf's head. One of them hit the guy in the eye while the other pierced his forehead, striking with enough force to knock the young man over backwards. The thug-in-chief scoffed at how easy it had been. Now all they had to do was get rid of its incognito familiar and the metal golem, and they'd be practically rolling in it.

“Weak.”

What should have been a corpse suddenly spoke, putting the five criminals on high alert.

“Level 25. 30 at most. Way too weak. Only good as a light snack.”

The ginger elf stood slowly, his words ominously monotone. The wooden bolts fell from its skull one after the other as the should-have-been-fatal wounds closed in a matter of moments. The thugs felt chills down their spines when they recognised the clearly unnatural creature before them. Nothing in the briefing had said anything about this.

“That’s okay,” the not-an-elf reassured them, its face twisted into a sweet, terrifyingly calm smile. “You’re just in time for dinner.”

The thieves’ nervousness turned to fear and then panic as they watched what should have been an easy mark transform into a whirlwind of steel, teeth and flesh, which descended upon them like Death incarnate.

Suffice to say, the town of Bootsplit was about to experience a dramatic spike in murders, followed by a period of unnaturally low crime.

Part Six

A dwarf napped pleasantly in his simple wooden chair, his soft snores echoing slightly through the narrow stone hallway he was supposed to be keeping an eye on. Although this behaviour was certainly not befitting an official guard, none of his peers would be able to fault him for it. The actual 'guarding' consisted solely of waiting for someone on the other side of the circular steel door next to him to speak the password so that he could open it from the inside. He was more akin to a doorman than an actual guard.

After all, the door in question was not only cleverly concealed as one of the many wine casks inside a large restaurant's cellar, but it was also impossible to open from the outside. Granted, this wasn't the only way in or out of the hidden complex, but it was the most commonly used passage of the grunts and enforcers of the Honeydew Cartel. They had a separate entrance at the opposite end that was mostly used for ferrying goods in and out of the hideout, but they only used that for huge shipments that wouldn't have fit otherwise. Just because their organisation wasn't particularly big didn't mean that they shouldn't take a few extra precautions, so as not to be discovered.

Especially considering that their main source of income wasn't extortion or armed robbery. That was for brainless bandits who lived in the woods and slept in the dirt. Admittedly, the cartel would still do those things on the side when a good opportunity presented itself, but their specialty was smuggling. The town's proximity to the northern border and the Imperial highway meant that all manner of cargo, illegal or otherwise, had to pass through Bootsplit in one way or another. As such, it was inevitable that smuggling rings would take root in the settlement.

The Honeydew Cartel in particular worked mainly with narcotic substances of a highly addictive nature, such as Fairy Dust or the Honeydew they had named themselves for. The drugs were produced en-masse in the Ishigar Republic to the north, where their use and sale wasn't illegal like it was in the Empire, though it was still strictly regulated. They were smuggled across the border and resold to other organisations looking to peddle them to any commoners looking for a fix. Overall, the setup ensured a steady stream of profit for everyone involved. Except, of course, the users.

As a secondary source of income, the cartel also dabbled in arms trafficking, which involved selling Fine and Superior Empire-forged

weapons and armour to the elves across the border. This wasn't strictly illegal, but skirting the strict regulations and heavy taxation involved meant that the payoff was worth the minimal risk.

All things said and done, the organisation was doing quite well for itself, although its members didn't even number in the triple digits. Unfortunately, they were rather lacking in the information department. Most traders and merchants simply passed through Bootsplit without lingering, at most stopping only to rest for the night before moving on towards the capital. One could hardly blame them, considering the shady elements that dwelled here, but it made gathering sensitive intel quite the challenge.

That didn't mean that they didn't try, however. The cartel had an informant in pretty much every guild in town, offering them a bounty of gold for any juicy information from the Empire's heartland. One such mole was a Warlock going by the rather unsavoury name of Grimebeard. In fact, he had alerted them earlier today of a young and relatively low-Levelled elf with an Artifact-grade item in his possession. It had been clear that he'd wanted the item for himself, but the cartel had had other ideas.

A single one of those ancient treasures could fetch tens of thousands of GP if sold to the right bidder, far more than anything the old Warlock could possibly offer them. He had been told in no uncertain terms that the cartel would be taking charge of the Artifact to sell to their contacts across the border.

The old dwarf had momentarily forgotten that – no matter how amicable they seemed – the Honeydew Cartel was still a criminal gang that would always put their own profits first. He had had to begrudgingly give up on getting his hands on the staff, though he'd been somewhat placated by the extra-large finder's fee. It wasn't exactly what he had wanted, but it would still be quite a bit more than the big fat nothing he would have gotten otherwise.

After agreeing to the cartel's terms, he'd told them everything he knew about the mark, a young man by the name of Chester Underwood. Everything from his appearance right down to the confidential information Grimebeard had gleaned from his Full Appraisal. The cartel had quickly realised that this was the same ginger-haired elf with the personal steel golem whom one of their own had identified as a potential person of interest earlier in the day. The chance to get their hands not on only the

Artifact, but also the golem's control rod had simply been too good to pass up.

So, the boss had decided that they would just gobble up the unsuspecting elf. It would hardly be the first time that they had made someone disappear, and the job would be easy enough as long as they could take him out quickly and quietly. Six of their enforcers had immediately been dispatched to track down 'Mister Underwood' and relieve him of both his valuables and his life. Although a few of them had thought that sending so many was perhaps overkill, none of them particularly minded ganging up on a single kid if it meant that they'd get paid without losing any of their fellows.

That had been over five hours ago.

BAM BAM BAM

"Frozen pickles!"

The slumbering doorman was rudely woken by an aggressive knock at the door. After taking a few seconds to wake up and a few more wondering just what he had just said, he finally realised that he had a visitor.

"Fifteen!" a panicked voice called from outside. "Twenty-two! Sixty-four! Uh, th-thirty? Yeah, thirty!"

The dwarf rubbed the sleep from his eyes, double checking the note on the wall to confirm that the numbers were indeed that week's password. He stood from his chair and walked to the circular metal door next to his station, kicking it once to show that he had heard. He placed a hand on the valve-like locking mechanism and was about to turn it when the voice on the other side started yelling again.

"Hurry it up!"

"Hold yer horses, arsehole!" he shouted back.

Everyone knew that the door was too heavy to just magically swing open all on its own. Not that that wasn't possible, it was just far cheaper to have a low-ranking grunt do the heavy lifting. The large valve turned two full revolutions before the heavy locks finally disengaged. The guard pulled the door ajar with a bit of effort, allowing a draft of fresh air to rush in as the main entrance opened slowly.

The gatekeeper peered through the doorway to see a thin, tattooed dwarf, his gear drenched in sweat, standing in the middle of the cellar. He lunged through the opening, shoving the guard roughly out of the way, then hurriedly shoved the door closed and spun the lock. Once the entrance had

been firmly sealed, he slid to the ground with his back against the door, panting heavily from both exertion and fear.

"Tubbs? What the blast are you doing?" the shocked doorman asked. "Wait, where are the others?"

The ironically-nicknamed 'Tubbs' had been one of the six that had left earlier that day. The fact that he was returning alone and in such a dire state was distressing, to say the least.

"Th- They're dead!" he blurted between gasps for air.

"Dead? What you mean dead?! I thought you guys were just going to nab some scrawny twig!"

It had supposedly been a sure thing, so how had-

"That was no fucking elf!" Tubbs screamed, his voice and body quivering. "I don't know what that… thing was, but it was nothing like we were told!"

"Then the others-"

"It ate them, man! It fucking gobbled them up like it was nothing! There was nothing I could do, it would've gotten me too if I hadn't run!"

"Teresa's tits… Did- Did that guy follow you here?"

"I-I-I don't know, I don't think so- But we can't take any chances! If that bastard Grimebeard set us up, then he might have sold out our hideout as well! We gotta warn the boss!"

"Fuck, you're right! Wait, why 'we?'"

"I- I need your help… I can barely walk…"

The gatekeeper examined the sweat-drenched Tubbs. He looked half-dead. The slender dwarf must have run clear across town at full speed for him to be this worn out, plus it was readily apparent that not all of the sweat was due to physical exertion. Clearly this was an emergency, so his bosses would hardly berate him for abandoning his post. Manning the front door at the moment would be pointless anyway, as Tubbs' group had been the only ones scheduled to return tonight.

Informing the boss what had happened to her boys, on the other hand, was of paramount importance. While she was ruthless to outsiders, she took good care of the boys under her wing, which had fostered an odd sense of camaraderie one wouldn't have expected from a gang of criminals. The Honeydew Cartel treated one another like family, and none of the men would be satisfied unless this treachery was dealt with swiftly and decisively.

“Alright, take my shoulder!” the doorman said, propping up the exhausted Rogue.

They moved hurriedly down the hallway, making their way out of the passage and into a cavern dug into the side of a hill near the edge of the town.

The dome-shaped structure had been created by magic and served as the hub of the Honeydew Cartel’s operations. The main chamber was a shared living space dotted with tables and chairs, a large kitchen on one side. The centre was dominated by a small arena where organised fistfights and other entertainment often took place. A number of doors lined the walls, each leading to a small room used for either storage or sleeping areas.

Tubbs and his escort circled the edge of the chamber towards the wall opposite the one they’d come in, drawing curious and worried glances from the roughly two dozen dwarves milling about the area. All had similar facial tattoos, marking them as members of the Honeydew Cartel and serving as a warning to people in the area not to dare lay a finger on any of the blokes. ‘Don’t mess with the cartel and they won’t mess with you’ was the unspoken rule in this neighbourhood.

The pair quickly reached a pair of heavy wooden doors, beyond which lay the boss’s chambers.

“Hey Jammy, what’s up with Tubbs?” one of the two dwarves guarding the room asked.

“Got bad news, Rocker!” the doorman panted. “Tubbs here says Hammerhead’s group got wiped out!”

“Holy sh- Here, let me help!”

The muscular dwarf quickly opened the heavy doors and helped to support Tubbs from the other side. The three of them stepped into a simple, sparsely-decorated room. Old wooden furniture, including three armchairs, a large bed and a pair of bookshelves lined the walls while three lanterns illuminated the windowless space. A tiny, wrinkled woman was sitting idly in a rocking chair off to the side, entertaining herself with the thick book in her hands. She lifted her bespectacled gaze from the tome and stared inquisitively at the trio before her.

“What’s the matter, dearie?” she asked in a soft, worried voice.

This was Granny Helga. Everything, from her demeanour to her simple clothes, gave the impression of a kindly old grandmother – a far cry from the cold, calculating criminal that lay beneath the facade.

“Tubbs said his group got wiped out, Gran!” Jammy reported.

The woman’s soft expression disappeared instantly, replaced by the stern countenance of a gang boss. The change was so drastic that it was as though she had become a different person in the blink of an eye. She motioned for Rocker to leave and close the door behind him, which he did immediately. She needed to handle the ugly situation undisturbed.

“Tell me what happened, Tubbs.”

The dwarf in question had been supposed to serve as the group’s lookout, watching over them and keeping an eye out for any witnesses or authorities that might interfere with their work. Should a fight break out, he could drop down from the rooftop to support his teammates. Or, if he judged that his colleagues were in a hopeless situation, the unpleasant task of reporting their failure would fall to him. The fact that he had returned alone was therefore quite troubling, to say the least.

However, Tubbs didn’t answer right away. He stared blankly at his feet, mumbling something too low to make out. If Granny Helga hadn’t known better, it would almost have sounded like he was chanting a Spell. But that was certainly impossible. Tubbs was a Rogue, and a damn good one at that. He was quick on his feet and skilled with his hands, but he definitely did not have a head suited for anything so complicated as magic.

Unfortunately for Granny Helga, this wasn’t the Tubbs she knew.

“True Darkness!”

At the dwarf’s words, the entire room was instantly engulfed in shadow, as if light itself was not permitted to exist within the confined space. There were some surprised gasps, a few muffled yells and the noise of something wet hitting the ground, followed by silence. When the darkness cleared, the only thing left of the dwarves was two puddles of blood and one chest-shaped doppelganger savoring its meal.

Tubbs had been long dead. Boxxy had noticed him while the dwarf had been trying to get a good angle to kill what he had thought was a Warlock while his five compatriots provided a distraction. An endeavour he had abandoned as soon as ‘Chester’ had showed its true colors. Once the shapeshifter had cleaned up the dwarves in the alley, it had quickly scaled the walls to restrain the last survivor skulking on the rooftop. Xera had then flexed her Dreamweaver Skill to probe the unwilling dwarf’s recent memory, which was how Boxxy had learned of this neat little hideout.

The plan from that point forward was simple – pose as the dwarf, infiltrate the base, meet with the leader and take her out before she could organise a defence. It had managed to pull off its little masquerade surprisingly well, mostly because the box-brained shapeshifter had played the part of someone overcome with fear. The monster had already had plenty of experience watching people flee from it in terror, so it had been able to replicate a state of screaming panic without much difficulty. This little scenario had been good training so far, but it was far from over.

The next step after removing the head was to devour the body.

Boxxy opened its Storage and brought Fizzy out, much to her relief. It was a good thing that the former gnome no longer needed to breathe, otherwise she would definitely have suffocated by now. Still, the dark confines were extremely unsettling, so she preferred not to have to spend any more time in there than strictly necessary.

Pulling out Voidcaller, the shapeshifter activated the staff's Innate Ability, the demonic skull once again laughing silently as an interdimensional doorway appeared and a slightly disgruntled Kora stepped out.

"Ugh," she grunted, clutching her head. "Bubble-butt was right, doing it this way is super weird."

The forced summoning didn't quite allow a demon's consciousness to fully bond with its hastily created body. Although not dangerous to either their soul or their conjured flesh, it nonetheless left them dizzy and disoriented for a few seconds while the former settled into the latter.

"At least you weren't treated like luggage," Fizzy frowned slightly.

"Hey, Gran!" came a muffled shout from outside the room. "You alright in there?"

It would appear that Rocker had heard the unfamiliar voices and was about to barge in to see what was the matter.

"What's the word, boss?" Kora cracked her knuckles in anticipation.

"At least twenty-seven targets, ten of them armed," Boxxy explained. "Likely more in the other rooms or outside, but this should be their main force. Snack is keeping watch on the exit in case any of them try to break out."

The spider-chest stowed Voidcaller back into its Storage, exchanging the staff for its favorite mithril daggers.

"I need three or four of them alive. Get rid of the rest," it commanded.

“Gran, I’m coming in!” Rocker yelled.

Before he could open the door, however, Kora’s armoured boot sent the heavy wooden object flying off its hinges – along with the dwarf on the wrong side of it. It smashed into a nearby table, pinning Rocker and another befuddled cartel member under its weight.

The loud crash gathered the attention of everyone present, all of whom stared in shock as a gigantic wall of muscle almost twice any of their heights stepped through the relatively tiny doorway. Then came a flash of something shiny and the sound of steel scraping against stone as the golem activated her Armoured Charge Skill. She closed the gap between herself and the nearest unfortunate meatbag in an instant, slamming into the poor sod with enough force to break multiple bones and send him crashing into a group of his friends.

“Alarm! Enemy attack!” someone shouted, sending all the dwarves into high gear.

The ones who weren’t armed headed quickly to retrieve their weapons, while the ones that were engaged the strange duo. They wanted to confirm Granny Helga’s condition, but most of them had already reached the grim conclusion that she was most likely done for. The monsters had emerged from her private chambers, after all, which meant that the only thing they could do right now was try to avenge her. Arrows, throwing knives and Spells flew at the bigger target while a trio of dwarves armed with maces, axes and shields engaged the smaller one.

Kora activated her Demonic Carapace, which covered her skin with tough metal scales. She took the barrage head on as she charged forward, intent on stomping the dwarves into paste. After a few running steps, she leapt through the air, landing right in the middle of a group of four crossbow-wielding thugs, who rolled away and scattered in a panic. The fiend’s powerful legs easily caught up to them as she kicked at the terrified fighters. Having to fight this way was a bit irksome, but these guys were way too short for her to throw any good punches.

Fizzy, on the other hand, was struggling. Her wrench flew at the heads and bodies of her opponents with deadly force, but the experienced combatants were able to either deflect the strikes or evade them completely. It seemed that she simply couldn’t measure up to the gang when it came to melee combat proficiency. After all, she hadn’t even been in a real fight until about a month ago, and even then she had only fought monsters.

The dwarves, though, had had ample experience fighting other enlightened due to the nature of their occupation, so they were managing to fend off her amateur attacks despite being weaker. The pint-sized Paladin's Champion of Chaos Skill may have given her glimpses into the future, but it wasn't particularly useful when dealing with reactions rather than actions.

However, the other side had their own share of troubles. The golem's thick steel hide and cursed shield was repelling all attacks aimed at her, and while she still suffered minor damage, it wasn't nearly enough for her to be worried about. Plus, if things got bad she could always heal herself in the middle of combat without worrying about random attacks interrupting her chants. And if it turned into a contest of endurance, her near-tireless body would win without question.

Not that the scuffle would ever get the chance to reach that stage, though.

Boxxy had, while doing its best spider-chest impression, quietly and stealthily skittered out of the boss's room while the dwarves were preoccupied with its minions. It crawled along the chamber's dome-shaped ceiling, looking for the perfect chance to strike. Once it was in position, it dropped a Mirror Image of itself onto the dwarves giving Fizzy trouble. Its copy landed directly behind them, using its downward momentum to pierce their scalps with a trio of iron sickles it had forged from its own flesh. It proceeded to follow its initial orders, providing backup for the inexperienced golem as she charged towards the next group of combatants.

Kora, on the other hand, was faring better than Boxxy had been expecting. The fiend had already stomped three of her assailants flat and was currently chasing down the last. Her body was riddled with wounds from all the hits she had taken, but she appeared to still be going strong. She hadn't even used her Second Wind Skill yet, which would provide her with an instantaneous burst of HP should the need arise. Still, it created another Mirror Image to watch her back all the same.

[Chaotic energies swirl around you. Your MP has been depleted.]

"HUCK!"

The ceiling-bound monster nearly fell to the ground when its Chaotic Disposition triggered dangerously. Even though it had mountains of HP, its MP was arguably just as vital a resource. Thankfully, it wasn't in any immediate danger as the dwarves on the ground were far too busy dealing with its copies and its minions. After several seconds, it had recovered

enough to open its Storage and take out a few mana potions, which it immediately consumed to restore 600 of its MP.

Just in time, too, as Boxxy spotted a troop of ten or so fully armed and armoured dwarves pouring in from one of the side chambers. It re-opened its pocket dimension and withdrew two of the Big Bang Balls it had prepared in advance, triggering the Spell Crystals and tossing them into the pack of dwarves. The resulting high-powered magical explosions turned the Honeydew Cartel's reinforcements into a fine red paste before they could even react.

[Level up!]

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 35 Warlock! INT +2. MNT +2. END +2.]

Wasting no time, Boxxy dropped to the ground and skittered through the same door from which the apparent reinforcements had come. This appeared to be a sort of armoury, the walls lined with weapons and armour sets. Several of the slower dwarves were still gearing up, but it had no intention of allowing them to finish. It dashed through the room, slitting throats and severing spines with every movement of its dagger-wielding tentacles. Once they had all been dealt with, it quickly gobbled up the corpses and returned to the main chamber, where the battle had already ended.

On the whole, it was another relatively easy victory, just as Boxxy had anticipated. Except for that speed bump where it had lost nearly all of its MP due to an unlucky Chaotic Disposition. It wondered if one of these days it might not just hit a 'Your HP has been depleted' notification and simply die on the spot.

… No, that probably wouldn't happen. Surely even the whimsical God of Happenstance wouldn't give his Hero a Skill that would outright kill it. On second thought, that was exactly the kind of thing that Wilberforce would do. Knowing him, there was probably an incredibly tiny chance that would bring him no small measure of entertainment should it actually happen. Then again, Chaotic Disposition's effects were always temporary, so maybe instant suicide couldn't be part of the deal.

Boxxy hastily decided that the latter possibility was more probable and that there was really nothing to worry about, though it would look into ways to control or stifle the ability.

Just in case…

It shifted its attention to the remnants of the criminal organisation that it had just dismantled. Three of the dwarves were still alive and were currently being restrained by Kora, just as her master had instructed. Thirty or so corpses were strewn about the area, and a quick check-in with Xera revealed that only two of the dwarves had tried to run and been summarily burned to ash. The other entrance appeared to still be sealed shut, so it didn't seem as though any witnesses had escaped.

In short, the underground compound was now under its complete control. Boxxy instructed Kora and Fizzy to keep an eye on the three captives to make sure that they didn't die just yet, then quickly searched all the rooms at the edge of the large chamber for noteworthy loot. Other than the armoury, there was a warehouse containing a number of unmarked crates, a well-stocked pantry brimming with fresh food and good drink, and several sleeping commons that held beds for at least eighty people.

That last one was a bit worrying, as it likely meant that there were still quite a few of the cartel people on the outside doing drug runs, or whatever it was they did. Boxxy didn't fret too much, though. It was planning to leave town once it was done with this place anyway, so a few rats still scurrying about were of no real concern. It had tracked down and assassinated Grimebeard before commencing its attack, so it really had no reason to stick around once it had wrapped things up here.

And thus, the warehouse was looted, the food in the pantry devoured, the corpses diligently absorbed or eaten and anything else of value stolen. Overall, the haul was a rather disappointing 2,400 GP worth of coins and valuables, much lower than the haul it had gotten from the Carran massacre. Still, Boxxy had been able to get in a lot of infiltration practice and its Storage was filled with a number of interesting substances, so it was hardly a bad day.

Actually, wasn't its day going almost too smoothly? The last time it had had so much good fortune in a single day, it had been captured, imprisoned, and had its Warlock Job taken by force. Fearing a backswing of bad luck, Boxxy stopped wasting time and moved on to the last thing it would need to do in the Lodrak Empire.

Right here, on the edge of town, it would perform a certain demonic ritual. That was why it had been so adamant about keeping a few of the dwarves alive – the ritual demanded a sacrifice of three lives. The ceremony itself was a bit complicated since it involved a bunch of dancing in addition

to the weird chanting and squiggly blood sigils, but Boxxy was confident that it could pull it off. This would hardly be its first time performing this sort of ritual, after all.

The tricky part was making sure that it had a clear escape route *before* performing the Offering to Liusolra.

Part Seven

The door leading onto the roof of the restaurant known as The Cracked Flagon flung open and a figure stepped out into the night. Boxxy surveyed the town from its reasonably high vantage point, noting that it had gone almost entirely dark. Unsurprising, considering that the sun had already set hours ago.

Dealing with the Honeydew Cartel to a satisfyingly thorough degree had taken longer than expected. Not only infiltrating and exterminating them, but also ransacking their hideout beneath the dining establishment. There were a lot of crates and boxes to rummage through – too many to fit into even the monster's house-sized Storage. It therefore had had to decide on the shiniest bits to bring along, which was what had taken most of the time.

In the end, Boxxy had decided to load up on all the decent arms and armour that it could find. The intel Xera had gotten from the dwarf called Tubbs had indicated that they could be sold for a good price across the border, unlike the shipments of illicit narcotics. The shapeshifter had taken two crates' worth of Honeydew-filled glass jars, however. Not because it wanted to sell or eat them, but simply because they were shiny. The thick liquid had a radiant golden colour that glittered dazzlingly when bathed in light, so the creature had happily added the four dozen jars to its ever-expanding collection.

It had still had some room left in its Storage, so it had taken the opportunity to raid the cartel's food supplies. Most of them had been eaten, with the rest stored for later. Dried meats, grain crackers and preserved fruits weren't all that tasty, but they were more than capable of sating its hunger. Not to mention that, if the shapeshifter wanted to disguise itself as a person, it would need to get used to eating the same foods that they did.

Boxxy had also made a point of taking six kegs of ale in accordance with Fizzy's input. According to her, the alchemically-brewed dwarven beer was so valuable that it wasn't an exaggeration to call it 'liquid gold.' A purely metaphorical statement, of course, as Honeydew was significantly closer to the literal interpretation of that shiny-sounding comparison.

And now that the looting was over, the shapeshifter looked hopefully up at the night sky, but wasn't particularly surprised to see that there weren't enough moons. Boxxy had asked around and discovered that all three of the giant glowing things would only appear simultaneously once every few

months. The event, known as the Lunar Convergence, would last for only about five or six hours at most, and its next occurrence would take place in about a month.

It looked as though Boxxy would be unable to attempt the Unholy Wealth ritual for quite some time, which was disappointing. Gathering and preparing all the necessary components and tools for the ritual in order to perform the ceremony at a moment's notice had ultimately been pointless. At the very least, the ritual required a material sacrifice rather than a living one, so it wouldn't have to concern itself with live captives when the time came.

That thought was for later, however, as tonight it would be performing the Offering to Liusolra. The ceremony, much like the Offering to Nagnamor, would allow one of the four demonic Overlords to manifest in the physical realm, albeit only for a few minutes. It wanted to do it right on the edge of a populated settlement as, prior to its capture, it had deduced that in order to raise its Demonology Skill Level, it needed to do more than simply perform the rituals. It had to utilise them fully, which in the context of the Offerings meant forcing, persuading, or otherwise goading the Overlord into doing what the Warlock wanted.

So long as that included something more… impactful than simply demanding that the demon punch themselves in the face over and over again.

In other words, as long as it could coerce Liusolra into running wild through the town, it was sure to gain a significant amount of Demonology Proficiency. Of course, it also had to make sure that it wouldn't be stomped flat by an irate Overlord, which was why the rooftop would serve as the ideal ritual site. Not only was it flat and large enough to house the demonic markings, but it also meant that Boxxy would be able to make a run for it by jumping off and using the buildings for cover. That, and summoning an Overlord underground seemed awfully counterproductive when the goal was for the demon to rampage through the town.

Come to think of it, would Liusolra even be like that? True, Punchy had tried to squash the little box into goop almost immediately, but that could have been because he was the most powerful archfiend in the Beyond. That alone was enough to make him the avatar of irritability, aggression and violence. It was unlikely that all the Overlords were so destructive, right?

… Actually, if it wanted insider information on the inner workings of the Beyond's hierarchy, didn't it already have not one, but two familiars that it could ask?

With that in mind, Boxxy turned to face its minions, who had followed it onto the roof.

"What's Liusolra actually like?" it asked curiously.

Kora, who was carrying a bound and gagged dwarf under three of her four arms, shrugged in ignorance.

"Dunno. I've heard of the name, but nothing about what they're like."

"How can you not know about Liusolra?" Xera asked incredulously. "Did you have your head up your ass the whole time you were in the Beyond?"

"Funny thing about that, actually-"

"It was a rhetorical question, you idiot," the succubus interrupted, shaking her head. "I don't actually want to know."

"Snack, do you know this guy?"

"Not personally, Master, but I have heard of her. Liusolra is the eldest of the Overlords and the most reclusive. Very few demons have actually spoken to her, even among her peers or kin."

"And what type of demon is she?"

"I don't know her exact species, but she's said to be the first stalker."

"Oh, one of those, huh?"

Stalkers were an arachnid species of anti-magic specialists. The lore gleaned from Demonology had informed Boxxy that they were cold and calculating, wanting nothing more than to devour anything in their path for their own enjoyment. They also enjoyed skulking around dark places and didn't appreciate being seen, so it made sense that Liusolra would live a hermit-like existence despite her station.

"Think I can reason with her?" Boxxy moved on to the meat of the matter.

"I would advise against it, Master," Xera shook her head. "Her kin can be just as violent and selfish as any other demon."

"I see… So, summon and run would be best, huh?"

"Indeed."

"What are you two nodding about over there?" Fizzy broke in.

Not being privy to their telepathic communications, she had been left ignorant of the somewhat ominous conversation that had just transpired.

“Nothing important,” Boxxy shook its head. “Just be sure that the prisoners don’t die until I need to sacrifice them.”

The only conscious dwarf groaned and began to struggle against his bindings.

“Yo, Titty McTitface!” the fiend raised her voice. “One of these guys woke up!”

The succubus calmly turned around and placed a hand on the unfortunate dwarf’s cheek, knocking him out with her Sleep Spell. Pacifying them wasn’t to prevent their escape, as they certainly weren’t strong enough to escape both their bindings and Kora’s grip. However, it was possible that they would hurt themselves in their confusion or do something unhelpful like biting out their own tongues if they realised what Boxxy had in store for them. Xera couldn’t allow them to throw their lives away like that, not when her master had a better use for them.

“By the way, boss, why don’t you just make an appo?” Kora suggested.

“A what?”

“An appointment. For a summoning.”

“You can do that?” Xera asked in confusion.

“Now who has her head up her ass?” Kora sneered. “That’s how things are normally done, aren’t they? You know, I heard the main reason uncle Naggy was so mad that one time was because you pulled him away from the bi-annual Five-Dimensional Tic Tac Toe Tournament. Probably would’ve gone down better if you’d scheduled it beforehand.”

“Wait, isn’t that the one Queen Shridiaphrial managed to win a while back?”

Shridiaphrial, the most powerful among the succubus-type demons as well as their self-proclaimed Queen, was also one of the four demonic Overlords. Boxxy recognised the name, as the Offering to Shridiaphrial was also one of the rituals it was aware of, but it had no intention whatsoever of performing that particular ceremony. A massive orgy demanding a literal cartload of semen to be prepared in advance was just too much work when compared to any of the others.

“That’s the one,” Kora nodded. “Losing to the Queen Bitch herself was bad enough, but I’m told the way she won’t stop bragging about it is the worst part. As if finally breaking Uncle Naggy’s streak of three hundred and sixty two consecutive victories by winning on a fucking technicality is something to be proud of!”

The two Overlords apparently had some sort of rivalry going on, and although Boxxy had no idea what 'Five-Dimensional Tic Tac Toe' was, the name alone sounded much too complicated for its mortal mind to comprehend. The fact that Punchy was good enough to beat the ultimate succubus in a battle of wits was quite impressive. But then, his performance always had been top-of-the-line.

Plus, this provided some rather interesting insight into the inner workings of the Beyond. It made sense that Nagnamor would be pissed if he'd been pulled away from something fun. Then again, he'd probably rampage all on his own regardless of when, where or by whom he was summoned, so Boxxy didn't particularly feel like fretting over it.

"How do I make an appointment?" it asked.

"Uh, good question," Kora furrowed her brow in thought. "I only heard about it from one of my brothers, so I dunno how it actually works… Why not give Carl a call, have him figure it out?"

"Oh! Great idea, Arms!"

Now those were three words that Xera had never expected to hear in the same sentence. Then again, the two simpletons always seemed to be on a similar wavelength. One of violence, instant gratification and not thinking things through properly, but similar nonetheless.

"Okay, I'll be busy talking to Carl, so don't bother me unless it's an emergency," Boxxy said out loud for Fizzy's benefit. "Keep watch on those three, especially the one on the left. He's awake and pretending to be asleep."

Its minions kept a watchful eye on the prisoners as Boxxy mind-dialed Demons 'R' Us.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Ring-ring

Ring-ring

Click

"Hello, you've reached Demons 'R' Us. My name is Carl and I'll be- Oh, hey Boxxy!"

"You knew it was me?"

"Yeah, I asked the boss to install Caller ID so that I know when it's you on the line."

"What's a Caller ID? Is it tasty?"

“Kind of, yeah,” Carl responded, having grown fairly fluent in Mimicanese as of late. “So, what can I help you with today, buddy?”

“I want to make an appointment.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

“I’m about to summon an unbound demon with a ritual. Arms said that appointments could be made ahead of time?”

“Ohhh! Right, those, of course. Sorry about that, it was an unusual request so it caught me a bit off guard.”

“Really? Arms said that this was normal.”

“Well, ‘normal’ isn’t the word I’d use. It’s proper procedure, yes, but it’s hardly common practice,” he explained. “Mortals rarely call us to ask about anything other than their contracts, you see. We don’t even hear from most after their first familiar’s been bound to them, either because they’re lazy or seem to think that we’ll suck their soul out through the connection or something.”

“… Can you actually do that?”

“We wouldn’t have a lot of clients if we did, you know.”

“I see…”

It made sense, in a way. Not only would dead Warlocks make for poor customers, but nobody would be willing to work with Demons ‘R’ Us if they gained a reputation for doing that. Boxxy didn’t fail to notice, however, that Carl had evaded the question of whether he *could* do that, but decided not to press the issue.

“Alrighty then, who is it you want to make an appointment with?” the devil asked matter-of-factly.

“Liusolra.”

“Oh, another Overlord, huh?”

Tak taktak tak takatak

“And how will you be performing the summoning?”

Boxxy briefly pondered the question. Were there other ways to call forth the demonic Overlords? That did seem to be the case, now that it thought back to the deal it had made to never summon Punchy again.

“I’ll be doing the Offering.”

“… You’re not using your familiars as collateral, right?” Carl asked sternly.

“No.”

“Okay, good. Just checking to make sure you didn’t forget.”

Tak tak taka-ta-tatak

"And when will you be planning on performing this Offering?"

"As soon as possible."

"Hmmm, the short notice might be a problem… Hold on, let me check her schedule real quick."

Takatatak taktak tak-tatatak taka-tak

"Ah, you're in luck. Overlord Liusolra is available for the next six hours. If you miss that window, then the next opening is four days from now."

"… What is it that you guys actually do over there?"

Boxxy couldn't help but notice that these Overlords sounded surprisingly busy considering that they spent every waking moment inside a realm of thoughts and dreams. It had been under the impression that demons were perpetually bored and mostly just lazed around telling stories when they were in the Beyond.

"Afraid I can't tell you," answered Carl. "It's classified. Plus, you seem like you wouldn't understand even if I told you."

"Yeah, probably not," it agreed.

The shapeshifter was still having trouble grasping concepts through words alone, though it was good at learning by watching and doing. That was why it had needed so much hands-on practise with its infiltration skills in the first place.

"So then, you said you wanted to perform the ritual right away?"

"Yes."

Takaktak taktak tak

"M'kay, you're all set. Just have to wait for her or her assistant to respond to the D-mail I sent and- Oh, nevermind. She's already agreed to the summoning. You have a knack for getting instant replies to stuff, don't you?"

That was it? It seemed almost too easy.

"So… I can just carry on with the ritual?"

"Sure, go right ahead."

"She won't try to eat me when she comes out, right?"

"That is something I do not know. Nor would I be at liberty to say even if I did. The only thing I can state for certain is that she's expecting you to summon her."

Along with the unspoken addendum that if Boxxy valued its existence, it would not keep the Overlord waiting.

"I see. Thanks, Carl."

"Anytime, buddy. Will that be all for today?"

"Yes."

"Alright then. I'm looking forward to seeing how this one turns out! Buh-bye!"

Click

"Wait! What did- Oh."

Carl had hung up before Boxxy could ask what he had meant by that last comment. Come to think of it, he had mentioned something about observing the creature the last time they had spoken, too. Perhaps Demons 'R' Us was keeping an eye on it to ensure that it didn't violate its amended contract? That certainly seemed plausible, though Boxxy somehow felt that that wasn't the case. For the moment, though, it seemed to have a good working relationship with Demons 'R' Us, so it didn't worry too much as it began its preparations.

Boxxy opened its Storage, bringing out everything necessary for the ritual: a wooden bucket, a wide painter's brush, four vials of blue-tinted mana potion and a bottle of clear alcohol called vodka. That last hadn't been looted from the cartel's pantry but swiped from the restaurant the organisation had used as a front. Boxxy had little interest in alcohol as it found the taste rather disgusting, but it wasn't planning to drink the bottle anyway. The ritual didn't call for vodka specifically, but 'a clear and hefty bottle of spirits.' This stuff just happened to fit the bill.

It poured the vodka and mana potions into the bucket, then used the brush to stir them together. It then held its human-looking hand over the substance, morphed one of its fingers into a razor and slit its wrist open. The ritual demanded 'the lifeblood of the summoner,' so it allowed the blood to spill in thick globs into the mixture below. Unlike the viscous yellow blood of a mimic, however, this stuff was dark red, bordering on black. The shapeshifter found that it could dilute the blood to look more like that of real people, but this was how doppelganger blood looked in its natural form.

Once Boxxy was sure the mixture was equal parts alcohol, blood and mana potion, it reactivated its Mend Flesh Skill to replenish its vitality and continued stirring. The various fluids formed some sort of alchemical

reaction, the mixture adopting a rich purple color and becoming rather sticky and goopy in consistency.

With the ‘paint’ now ready, Boxxy set about preparing the actual ritual site. First, it made a large circle about five metres in diameter, then drew an equal-sided triangle inside with each point touching the edge of the circle. It added another circle inside the triangle, making sure that the edges touched each of the triangle’s three sides.

Satisfied with the concentric geometric shapes, it proceeded to draw three complicated demonic sigils in the spaces between the triangle and the outer circle. Boxxy wondered why this ritual was so much more complicated than the previous one had been, but it made sense if this Liusolra really was the eldest of the Overlords. Not to mention that it expected her to have a much more reasonable personality than that living mass of flames and hate, though that could be said of just about anyone.

After finishing the sigils, it ordered Kora to place the sleeping dwarves inside the circle, warning her to be extra careful not to step on the still-wet markings. She placed a sacrifice in each space between the triangle and the inner circle. Their unconscious bodies were made to sit upright, although their upper bodies naturally lurched forward. It was an awkward posture, but it was good enough so long as their heads were within arm’s reach of the middle of the formation. A precaution that the shapeshifter immediately realised was moot considering that it could easily extend its limbs should need be.

Making sure everything was in order, Boxxy thought back to what it had learned regarding Liusolra’s race. Some subspecies of stalkers were rumoured to quite literally feast on mana, so there was a chance that she might try to suck the magic from any powerful enchanted gear she came across. The creature naturally wanted to avoid losing the things that it had gained from its most recent dungeon expedition, so it took measures to safeguard its belongings. A private pocket dimension seemed like a good enough hiding spot, so it opened its Storage to stow Voidcaller inside for safekeeping. It then removed a few sets of armour in order to make room for Fizzy.

While the Left Hand of the Forsaken Sentinel was technically part of her body, it was still an Artifact-grade magic item, and as such might tickle Liusolra’s fancy. And since it couldn’t be removed, that meant that the golem herself had to go inside its Storage, much to her disappointment. She

was loath to return to the claustrophobic space, plus she was curious as to what the actual ritual would look like. Still, spending some time in Boxxy's Storage was infinitely preferable to having her left arm eaten, so she begrudgingly crawled inside the swirling portal.

Its preparations complete, the elf-shaped monster stood in the center of the formation, gripping an iron dagger in each hand. It cleared its throat as it got ready to perform the actual ceremony.

It rested its arms against its sides and reversed the grip on its weapons so that they were pointing backwards, then began to bounce lightly in place using only its ankles and knees, causing its entire body to move up and down to some unheard rhythm.

Once it was moving at about two or three bounces per second, it began to shake its hips in an exaggerated manner. They swayed left and right in time with its bounces, much to Kora's amusement. Boxxy lifted its arms over its head, pressing the hilts of its daggers against the top of its skull so that the blades pointed upwards. Its twisted its wrists slightly to tilt the weapons forward and back, like sharp rabbit ears that bobbed and swayed in time with its movements.

The shapeshifter opened its mouth and began to chant.

"*Morbi aliquet eu dolor amet. Nulla auctor enim non foncet. Rhoncus el. Portus cora fore alet!*"

The strange words took on an oddly melodic tone, almost like singing. A strangely upbeat and energetic song too, entirely mismatched with its grim purpose.

"*Nectum felis magna, wah-ah-ah! Ovika era helftum, lah-lah-lah! Yo sol mi, til deu la melodi!*"

Crouching smoothly, Boxxy leaned forward and stretched its arms out. Its iron daggers easily pierced the top of the first dwarf's skull, relieving him of his life in an instant. The weapons were immediately withdrawn as the shapeshifter elf spun with a little pirouette, turning to face the sigil opposite the first sacrifice before resuming its bounce-assisted hip swaying.

"*Dans sal melous, klappar ena handen. Yors, onleyors, tooorah sindel dansden. Misslao lye, meesa inda clansen, leek nari haradi caramelltansen!*"

The purplish paint on the ground pulsed with a soft pink light that flashed for a split second every time Boxxy finished a downward motion. A strange mist gathered over the arcane sigil, the intensifying flashes from

below casting a vaguely humanoid shadow within the off-white vapor cloud.

"*Det blir ensensat yon verfelt stoss. Puester komm erala slip alloss. Kom igen, nu tar vi stegen om igen!*"

A steady thumping noise came from below, as if accompanying the strange song and dance. The figure in the mist became more and more defined into a solid, feminine shape, which mirrored the creature's bizarre movements.

"*Nectum felis magna, wah-ah-ah! Ovika era helftum, lah-lah-lah! Yo sol mi, til deu la melodi!*"

Boxxy repeated the second verse, spinning to pierce the second dwarf's skull. It pirouetted once again, turning to face the next sigil.

"*Dans sal melous, klappar ena handen. Yors, onleyors, tooorah sindel dansden. Misslao lye, meesa inda clansen, leek nari haradi caramelltansen!*"

The odd mist had by now spread over the entire rooftop, obscuring the view of the town around it. A second feminine figure appeared, also mimicking the shapeshifter's movements.

Lights went on in multiple houses as the locals finally began to notice the ritual taking place. Fearing that the guards might try to intervene, Boxxy gave a curt mental order to Arms and Snack to block the stairs to buy it time.

"*Curabitur mattis, diam a rutrum. Quisque id pellen vestibulum. Yo portus. Nulla vitae auf lectus!*"

Its voice had been steadily rising in pitch the whole time, and by now it sounded like something one would expect to hear out of a chipmunk. The strange colours flashing within the fog became brighter and more varied as it continued.

"*Nectum felis magna, wah-ah-ah! Ovika era helftum, lah-lah-lah! Yo sol mi, til deu la melodi!*"

The third and last dwarf's life was severed fluidly as Boxxy turned to the final sigil.

"*Dans sal melous, klappar ena handen. Yors, onleyors, tooorah sindel dansden. Misslao lye, meesa inda clansen, leek nari haradi caramelltansen!*"

There were now three shadowy backup dancers performing the otherworldly song and dance.

Boxxy moved relentlessly, shouting, "*Ooh, ooh, oowah, oowah!*" every now and then. Sounds of combat erupted from below as its familiars engaged the Bootsplit guards. People on the surrounding rooftops fired arrows and magic into the dense fog, but they couldn't even see what they were aiming at and the projectiles were swallowed by the glowing miasma surrounding the Warlock.

The Mimic refused to allow any of this to distract it and kept performing its part resolutely as the noise intensified. The three corpses deteriorated rapidly until all that was left of them were bleached bones, at which point both the thumping and the lightshow suddenly subsided.

Boxxy took its cue, standing perfectly still with the blood-soaked daggers crossed in front of its face. However, judging by the shadowy dancers continuing to bounce, the ritual wasn't over quite yet.

"*Sed ornare dolor erat! Quis placerat augue dignissim et!*"

Its voice rose to the heavens as its MP began to decrease. The simple daggers glowed a blindingly bright blue, the colour spreading through the mist like ink through water. The town's defenders had managed to fight through its familiars in the meantime, forcing them to fall back to the roof as they stalled for time. The mortals would follow after them any second now, but they would be too late to stop what was about to happen.

"*Praesent ultricies Liusolra!*"

Boxxy shouted the final part of the incantation, flinging the daggers upward with all its might. They exploded in a blinding flash of light with a noise like a thunderclap. Wasting no time, Boxxy leapt off the side of the building, landing on the cobblestone street. It attempted to execute a forward roll to redirect its momentum, but slipped on the wet ice that had begun to melt in the morning sun and fell flat on its back.

"Wait, what?"

The confused doppelganger looked around in a panic, noticing that it was now apparently morning and the street – along with the surrounding townscape – had been entombed in clear blue ice, its robes encrusted with the large, jagged shards. It checked on its Status, noticing immediately that its Demonology Skill had gone up to Level 7. The final, though hardly most bizarre change that it noticed was that it had been stabbed through the chest with a large, sword-shaped icicle.

The ice had pinned a piece of strange, snow-white parchment with some writing on it to Boxxy's person. The monster unhesitatingly pulled the sharp

object from its chest to grab hold of the cloth. Or at least it tried, but the parchment was frustratingly hard to grasp. It was like a piece of silk so smooth that it seemed unaffected by something as basic as friction.

The doppelganger would not be bested by a piece of cloth, however, and it gripped the offending parchment by puncturing its edges with a set of needle-like steel claws. Now that the notice was firmly in hand, it took a long hard look, failing to read a single word of it. It tried ordering its familiars to its side, but they had apparently been killed during… whatever it was that had happened last night.

Boxxy suddenly realised that it had an able reader almost literally right under its nose and opened its Storage so that Fizzy could finally crawl out.

"Finally!" she exclaimed. "I was stuck in there… for… for… what… Huh?"

Her words trailed off into confusion as she beheld the winter wonderland.

"Read this."

Boxxy thrust the parchment into her face as it spoke, obscuring the surreal scenery. Fizzy, whose thought processes were currently busy… well, processing, ground to a halt upon seeing the contents of the note. She knew many things, but how to respond to this was not one of them.

Dear Boxxy,

Sorry for freezing you like that. I'm a bit shy, you see, so I didn't feel comfortable having you stare at me while I did my thing. I appreciated the chance to come out and play, though! It was a lot of fun ♡♡♡! Call on me again if you need something else put on ice! We'll hang, okay!?!

XOXOXO

~Liusolra of the Endless Swarm

Epilogue

Spymaster Edward Allen walked briskly along the cobblestone road, careful to be mindful of his footing. He wore a thick brown cloak which hid his entire body from view, with his official officer's uniform underneath. The dark grey leather armour and pale blue tabard denoted his Imperial status, but could not shield him from the cold. As odd as it was to be worried about such things during the last days of summer, the current environment nevertheless demanded it.

The similarly-clothed figure to his right was the black-haired beauty with the callsign 'Zone.' She kept a silent vigil on their frozen surroundings, her face so utterly devoid of emotion that it fit right in with the frigid weather and silent streets. Though they were walking through the middle of Bootsplit – a once lively dwarven town along the Imperial highway – their surroundings were completely devoid of life.

The road the officers were walking on, along with most of the neighbourhood, had been encased in a thick layer of ice quite literally overnight. Nearly a thousand of the town's residents had been caught in the inexplicable and clearly unnatural event, and several adventurer guilds outside the disaster area had also been turned into glaciers.

The fact that those offices had apparently been specifically targeted was a clear sign that the tragedy was no accident or random quirk of nature, but a calculated, deliberate act of terrorism. One that had somehow been carried out without leaving a single witness capable of explaining what, exactly, had transpired here.

Which was why Edward and his team had been dispatched to investigate. The Spymaster himself hadn't particularly seen the need to come out here himself, but a direct order from the Emperor wasn't something that he could just ignore. And now that he was actually here, he felt an odd tingle of foreboding. It was the same sensation that he had experienced when he had first laid eyes on the smouldering crater and perpetual dust storm that had once been the city of Monotal.

For this place was still frozen solid, despite the event having taken place six days ago. The unnatural ice permeating the entire town seemed to melt somewhat during the day, but grew thick and heavy once more as soon as the sun went down. While the Arcaneum dispatch that had come along with the Spymaster had been steadily working to thaw the place with magic, it

would probably take them weeks before they finished. Even then, the damage had already been done. The memory of the disaster would linger forever, a black mark in the Empire's history books.

Again, much like Monotal.

Edward and Zone continued to pick their way along the ice-covered ground until they made it to their destination – the local branch of the Order of the Black Wand. The Arcaneum boys had already liberated the building from the persistent ice and were using it as a temporary headquarters. The armed guards at the front door saluted silently as the officers entered the water-damaged remnants of the guild's waiting area. Several people in various robes were milling about, as well as a few civilians who had either been brought in for questioning or had only just now been thawed from their icy cocoons.

"Hey, old man! How's it hanging?"

A cheerful voice completely ill-befitting the solemn atmosphere called out to Edward. The Spymaster scowled, turning to face the one who had addressed him so brazenly. The man's short blond hair glistened with moisture, though whether it was sweat or water was difficult to tell. His blue eyes were barely visible through his squinting eyelids, the youthful, clean-shaven face set in a thoroughly carefree smile. He wore a set of light blue robes draped with a pale blue officer's tabard, a patch emblazoned with the Gilded Hand's insignia stitched to his left shoulder.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to address me so casually?" Edward chastised him.

"Hahaha, sorry old ma- I mean, sir. Force of habit!"

"Drop the antics, Question. Show me what you found."

"Ah, right. Walk this way."

Edward and Zone followed the man known as Question into the back of the building and up to the second floor. They went into a conference room filled with a massive table and a number of chairs, although it appeared that it was currently in use as an office of some sort. Stacks of paper were strewn about the table and all over the floor, while a huge map of the surrounding area had been pinned to one of the walls. Question spent a minute moving the mess around to allow his compatriots to take a seat, then stood next to the map. He picked up a wooden pointer from the floor, slamming it against the map with a flourish.

“Right, so,” he began his presentation. “The good news is, I believe we’ve identified the root cause of what we’re tentatively calling ‘F-day.’ The bad news is that it’s your fault, old man.”

Edward sighed in exasperation.

“For the hundredth time, Question, not every single bad thing that happens is my fault.”

He would have already slapped the upstart into next week if he hadn’t been aware of his problematic personality. It wasn’t just him, either. Some way or another, every single person within his inner circle had some troublesome quirk to them. Edward couldn’t help but wonder yet again – how had it gotten like this?

“No, of course not,” Question chuckled, tapping the map again. “This one is, though. Look, I even made you a diagram!”

He reached into his robe, pulling out a slightly wrinkled piece of parchment. He unrolled it to reveal a number of graphs and pie charts which he had neatly drawn up, along with the words ‘CONCLUSION: EDWARD’S FAULT’ circled and underlined in the corner.

“The facts don’t lie, you know,” he added with a carefree smile.

Edward sighed again. He may have been insufferable, but if there was one thing Question was good at, it was finding answers. The man’s skill at gathering, organising and analysing information was top-notch, not to mention his extraordinary ability to spot patterns. The problem was that, although all those qualities made him good at piecing together puzzles, they also made him an intolerable know-it-all.

Not to mention that he *always* found a way to blame Edward for every single bad thing that he had ever been asked to investigate. His determination to lay blame upon his employer would have been impressive if it hadn’t been so damned infuriating.

Still, if Question had any insight into the mystery at hand, then it was Edward’s duty as his superior to hear him out. It was the only reason that the Spymaster was willing to tolerate the analyst’s borderline insubordination in the first place.

“Alright, let’s hear it,” he said dejectedly. “Show me what you got.”

“Do you want the short version or the long version?” the blond man asked, twirling his pointer.

“Is the short version ‘this whole Bootsplit incident is Edward’s fault?’”

“… Maybe.”

"Then give me the long version."

"Gladly!" Question smiled widely as he started his explanation. "So! Let's begin by establishing the ways in which Edward failed to prevent this catastrophe. First of all, you let your mimic prisoner escape."

Zone, who had fittingly been zoning out until then, suddenly took notice, as she had a personal stake in the prisoner that had gotten away. Her mentor, on the other hand, was much less enthusiastic, judging by the way he furrowed his brow and pinched the bridge of his nose irritably.

"… So that thing's involved after all, huh?"

The incident already had the same stench to it as the Monotal case, so it wasn't as though part of him hadn't been expecting this. Boxxy T. Morningwood had proven far more annoying than the Spymaster had initially anticipated. First had come the inane answers that had somehow managed to confuse even his Eyes of Truth during the interrogation. Then, it had somehow managed to escape its bindings mid-flight – which, while impressive in its own way, had drastically derailed the Spymaster's plans to replicate the Calamity. The bright side, though, was that it had at least dropped a few hints as to where Edward could start looking.

Based on the new information, the Spymaster had sent Zone with a few other subordinates and some scholars on an expedition to Redrock Ravine – a weak, out-of-the-way dungeon on the Empire's eastern fringe. Their task had been to extract the dungeon core and discover how to force it to go into meltdown. And while conquering the Ravine and locating the core had both been accomplished easily thanks to Zone's absurd strength, the team's efforts had thereby immediately ground to a halt.

They were completely unable to dislodge the dungeon core from its magically-affixed spot.

They had arrived at the site with various theories and guesses, yet hadn't managed to make any progress even after weeks of poking and prodding at the crystal sphere. The Empire's foremost 'experts' on dungeons, and they'd been losing to a two-month-old monster that didn't even know how to tie its metaphorical shoelaces. Not a single one of them had been able to figure out how to make the blasted core move even a single millimetre from its original position.

Well, that wasn't entirely true. Zone *had* proposed 'hitting it really hard,' which had been immediately shot down by every scholar at the site. They had been adamant that there was simply no way for brute force to

overcome a dungeon's peculiar brand of magic when their own Spells, potions and magic tools had failed. The most her idea would accomplish, they claimed, was to damage or even rupture the dungeon core, possibly causing it to explode right on the spot.

Zone had merely shrugged and continued to follow her orders to keep them out of danger. Her instructions had been to keep them safe, not assist with the actual experiments, so she had quietly fulfilled her duties without sticking her neck out until she'd finally been relieved by someone else two weeks ago. And judging from her mentor's perpetually bad mood, those self-proclaimed experts hadn't made a single shred of progress since.

In the end, Edward had been left without the weapon of mass destruction that he had wanted so badly, at least until he could recapture Boxxy and properly interrogate it. That, however, was easier said than done. The possible places that the monster could have hidden were just too numerous to launch any sort of coordinated search. Its name had, of course, been added to the country's list of wanted criminals, but that would only pan out if it were stupid enough to try to do Mercenary Guild work again.

As for the gnome, Edward had already written her off when Hook's investigation of her psychic residue had revealed that she had undoubtedly been eaten. One less thing to worry about, at least, especially considering the very real possibility that the creature had had outside assistance during its escape. That was a separate mystery altogether, however, and there were more immediate concerns for Edward to deal with.

"Alright, Question. Let's hear it," the Spymaster said tiredly.

"Hear what?" the analyst asked in mock ignorance.

"You know damn well what I'm talking about. Just get it out of your system so we can move on with this."

"Oh, do you mean the fact that I told you so? Because I did tell you that that monster was definitely going to come up north! But nooo! My 'baseless conjecture' wasn't enough for you! You didn't want to waste 'precious manpower' to search beyond the Sawblade Mountains and *ignored your damned analyst*. Because we were *certain* to figure out the Calamity method all on our own! Well guess what?! We got done in by a fuckin' box! Not once! Not twice! But *three* fucking times! All because you refused to listen to me, you senile old geezer!"

Question took a few deep breaths to calm himself down. He had gotten so engrossed in his rant that he actually felt a bit dizzy.

“Are you done?” Edward asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m done.”

“Good.”

THWACK

Question regained consciousness a few minutes later and continued his presentation as though nothing had happened. Zone made a mental note of the blond analyst’s grit and dedication. It took a special kind of fortitude to speak so calmly after being literally kicked through the wall. That said, she was having an awfully hard time taking him seriously with Edward’s boot print on his face. That would stick around for at least a few days, if past experience was any indication.

“So, once the mimic escaped from the griffins, it landed somewhere in the Sawblade Mountains,” he traced Boxxy’s route across the map as he spoke. “It then moved steadily northwards, avoiding civilisation for the most part. Given Zone’s Appraisal of the creature and the average Level of monsters in that region, it’s highly likely that it has already Ranked Up.”

“Shit.”

Edward cursed under his breath, though not because he disagreed with Question’s words. Quite the opposite, in fact. It was only natural that a creature capable of wiping out entire squads of armed guards would have little difficulty battling its fellow monsters, and the wilderness held no shortage of targets. Tracking the thing had been difficult enough when it had been just a box-bound shapeshifter, and now it had probably evolved into something else entirely. With no way of knowing what species it had Ranked Up to, his agents would have no idea what they were even looking for anymore.

“We then received some information regarding the mountain village of Carran south of here,” Question continued. “A merchant reported it as completely deserted with not a single soul in sight. After sending people to investigate, we’ve been able to determine that the village was not abandoned, but eaten.”

The Spymaster blinked.

“Come again? A whole village was eaten?”

“Indeed. There were no signs of open combat and no bodies to be found, just empty houses and bloodied bedrooms. Except for what appeared to be the guards or militia protecting the wall. Those had been turned into piles of black ash.”

“I see… That’s definitely our monster’s handiwork.”

Boxxy had left behind a similar trail at the site of a certain caravan that it had ambushed on its way from Monotal to Erosa. Unfortunately, neither Question nor those Arcaneum eggheads had been able to figure out exactly what could’ve produced those peculiar leftovers, but they were nonetheless a dead giveaway that Boxxy had been there.

“How many casualties?”

“Two hundred and eighty-five. Well, assumed anyway. Couldn’t confirm the exact count, but given the circumstances…”

“So, it must have spent several days feasting on them?”

“Indeed. Though it likely eliminated all the civilians on day one, I find it impossible to believe that a single monster could consume so much mass in one sitting. That said, there was nothing stopping it from loading the bodies onto a cart or something and taking them with it.”

A reasonable assumption, though it severely underestimated Boxxy’s post-Rank-Up hunger pangs.

“Whatever the case, it must have known we’d be coming after it,” the Spymaster mumbled, mostly to himself. “It wouldn’t have stayed long before moving on, and given its path it must have passed through here.”

“Yup,” Question confirmed.

“And that’s when it somehow caused ‘F-day,’ huh?”

“Nope.”

“… What do you mean, ‘nope?’ This sort of disaster is clearly right up its alley.”

“That may be so, and while the mimic was likely involved, I have reason to believe the chief perpetrator in this case was someone else. Here, gimme a sec.”

The analyst stepped away from the map for a moment to rummage through his notes. He brought out a large rolled parchment, which he unfurled and stuck roughly to the wall with a couple of small knives. Generally speaking, pinning things to the walls in a borrowed space was quite rude, not to mention unnecessary. However, Edward had already put a Question-shaped hole in the wall, so nobody was going to notice a few knife marks. Besides, the Gilded Hand was hardly one to hesitate when it came to property damage.

“Now then, where were we?”

He tapped his pointer on the new map, this one of the Empire's northern territory. As he spoke, he indicated the Empire's capital city at the southern edge of the paper.

"I spoke briefly with Master Shinji in Oshinas, just before we were dispatched here."

"Your old teacher, right?"

The name rang a bell in Edward's mind. The two of them had met only in passing, but the Spymaster still knew of Arakawa Shinji, the Level 100 Warlock who lived in the northern province not far from the town of Bootsplit. He was an odd man with a dubious background, but his loyalty and service to the Empire were exemplary.

Although not quite a full-blown meritocracy, the Lordak Empire had a long-standing tradition of uplifting those who had proved themselves capable. Shinji was one such, as his position of viscount had been earned through his blood, sweat and tears, rather than simply handed to him due to noble birthright.

"Is he involved in this somehow?"

"Not that I know of," Question shook his head. "Though the old geezer did tell me something interesting. Apparently, he encountered the most intriguing ginger-haired elf on his way to the capital. Shinji's a bit of a misanthrope, so the fact that he took notice of a stranger struck me as unusual. Although he admitted that the elf himself looked pretty plain, apparently his entourage was anything but. He was accompanied by a steel golem and two demons that appeared to be his familiars. Namely, a blue-skinned succubus and a female fiend, both with exceptionally huge knockers."

"Hmmm…" Edward cupped his chin in thought. "Sounds like their owner is quite the-"

He froze mid-sentence as a crazy idea struck him. He pulled out his booklet, leafing through until he reached his notes on a certain interview from over a month ago. He quickly skimmed the page with the words 'perverted box' circled and underlined at the top.

"The elf was our mimic?!" he exclaimed.

"Close, old timer, but not quite! He is, however, our main suspect."

Question pointed back to the map of Bootsplit, more specifically its southern gate, his expression turning uncharacteristically serious.

“An elf whose description matched the one Master Shinji gave me was recorded entering the town the day after their chance meeting took place, on the morning before F-day. The Scribe on duty logged him as a seventeen-year-old male elf, a Level 25 Warlock bearing the name Chester Underwood.”

Edward nearly leapt from his seat at the last bit.

“An Underwood was here?!”

Coming from a long line of spies, assassins and sleeper agents with strong ties to the Ishigar Republic’s Foreign Intelligence Bureau, the elves of the Underwood family were notorious within the world of international espionage. They had a reputation for being meticulous, efficient and highly adaptive, one that Edward had been able to personally confirm during his many years of service to the Emperor. Just thinking about those people made the deep scars on his left cheek and forehead ache.

That said, something seemed off about this.

“Are we certain it was the real deal? Those twigs would never leave an obvious trail like this.”

Indeed, in most cases one would never know an Underwood was in their midst until well after they were gone. And that was assuming that anyone ever realised they had been there at all. While one would think an Appraisal would be enough to root them out, these were agents with government connections. It was shockingly easy for them to have the names on their Status discreetly altered by the right Scribe. As a matter of fact, that had been one of Zone’s main duties for years.

“Normally, I would agree with your scepticism,” Question twirled his pointer. “However, I believe that this was a deliberate act rather than an oversight.”

“So, they wanted us to know that they’ve been through here.”

“Yup,” the younger man nodded.

“To what purpose, though?”

“I’m getting to that.”

Question rummaged again through the stacks of papers, pulling out one marked with the Order of the Black Wand’s official stamp.

“These here are the ‘confidential’ results of the Full Appraisal of one Chester Underwood. He visited this guild in order to have his Warlock Job advanced and get a magic item Appraised. His Warlock Skill set is… Well, it’s exactly the same as the ones the mimic had, based on Zone’s report.”

Edward took the documented Appraisal results, mulling them over.

"Hmm, so he had the Demonology Skill… No Mentor Skill, so he wasn't the one who gave the monster its Warlock Job… Perhaps they had the same teacher? Wait, who was the trainer that this elf met with?"

"One Joshua Grimebeard. Missing, of course."

"Missing? So, he's not one of the frozen dwarfcicles littered about the place?"

The majority of the citizens of Bootsplit caught in the wake of the catastrophe had been encased in the same magical ice that had covered the entire neighbourhood. It hadn't killed them outright, but had instead placed them in a sort of magically-induced suspended animation. Not all had survived the process and many were still being thawed out, but Arcaneum reports suggested that at least sixty percent of them were expected to make a full recovery. Frankly speaking, the fact that any of them were able to be saved was nothing short of miraculous.

"We've had several subjects who match his physical appearance, but none who were affiliated with the Order," Question explained. "His place of residence was outside of the affected area, so theoretically he should have been spared. As far as we can tell, he gathered his valuables and skipped town in the confusion, though it's hard to tell if this happened before or after everything froze. But the timing is rather curious."

"I see. It makes sense that he wouldn't want to stick around if he was involved. The fact that this Underwood went to see him specifically also concerns me. Their kind normally doesn't trust anyone outside of their own family."

"It's not unreasonable to think that a dwarf could be an Underwood," Question pointed out. "Unlikely, but not impossible."

Enlightened races could easily procreate with one another, after all. The resulting mix-bloods would always be of the same species as the mother, though they would inherit certain traits from the father. One such example was sitting next to Edward, in fact, as Zone was the product of the extremely unlikely union between a human woman and a raptor male. Her yellow eyes and odd personality were things the Spymaster attributed to her lizard-man of a father.

"Hmm. I suppose the Underwoods are a fairly diverse clan," Edward conceded. "Hold on a minute, though. How do we know this Chester fellow is connected to our mimic?"

“Suggesting that the name may be a pun on the word ‘chest,’” the female officer in the room spoke up.

“Please don’t insult my intelligence, Zone,” Question shot her down. “My conclusions are based on more than just word association, even if my evidence is somewhat circumstantial.”

Ironically enough, though, the woman’s blind guess had in fact been right on the money. The main reason Boxxy had chosen ‘Chester Underwood’ as its alias was due entirely to the fact that it saw itself as an undercover wooden chest.

“Enlighten us, then,” Edward insisted. “What is this circumstantial evidence of yours?”

“The ledger at the south gate said that our suspect wore a robe bearing the insignia of the Brotherhood of the Third Eye, a small-time Caster-oriented guild. One with an office in Carran.”

Question thwacked the village’s position on the map.

“Our suspect’s physical appearance matched the recorded description of one of the guild’s members, though the attached name was obviously something else. Based on that, and what Master Shinji told me of his random encounter, I have concluded that the elf was most likely an FIB agent using the village as a base of operations.”

It was perhaps a bit ambitious to assume that a seventeen-year-old could be an agent or spy, but only if one underestimated the Underwoods. Subterfuge had run through the clan’s veins since the days of the Elven Dominion, and they started training their field operatives at a young age, generally around ten years old.

“And you’re sure he was working with our escaped mimic?”

“I honestly don’t see how else the elf could have survived. A single Warlock would be no match for a medium-sized monster with at least twice as many Levels. Especially if he was gutted in his sleep like the rest of the villagers seem to have been.”

“Hmm, I see. It certainly sounds feasible when you put it like that.”

The assumption was admittedly, as Question had stated, based on rather circumstantial evidence. Still, there were simply too many factors supporting the theory. Not to mention that this Boxxy T. Morningwood had proven itself capable of cooperating with enlightened individuals rather than simply killing them outright. The next question was: what sort of deal could possibly have been made that would be worth it to both sides?

Unfortunately, the answer was painfully obvious.

"Heh. Those FIB bastards got us good, didn't they?" Edward sighed with a small, dry chuckle.

The elf must have promised the monster asylum across the border in exchange for information on the Calamity. He would keep his life and bring his superiors a lovely present, while the mimic would in turn receive their protection. It was also likely that whoever had broken Boxxy out of captivity had pointed it towards the youngster as a point of contact.

"Oh? Could it be that this old geezer hasn't gone completely senile?!"

"What about F-day, though?" Edward ignored Question's comment. "How does that relate to any of this?"

"According to our investigation of the area, the epicentre of the ice is an establishment called the Cracked Flagon."

He pointed towards a particular spot on the town map, a small red 'X' directly in the middle of a larger red circle, presumably the borders of the frozen disaster area.

"That sounds familiar," Edward noted.

"It should! It serves- well, *served* as a front for the Honeydew Cartel. You know, the one we occasionally hired to- ***Ahem*** I mean, the cartel that we have absolutely no connection to that sometimes came up in our reports since they smuggled weapons and drugs in and out of the elven Republic."

"Right, that ridiculous little outfit with the Granny figurehead. What about them?"

"Well, their entire operation was dismantled, likely prior to the town being frozen solid. Their underground hideout was mostly untouched by the ice, so we were able to confirm the signs of an intense battle. Lots of property damage, smashed furniture, blood stains, etcetera, but not a single sign of a corpse aside from a dozen or so piles of black ash."

"Meaning that our monster single-handedly wiped them out."

"Exactly," the analyst nodded grimly. "Also, judging from the evidence at the scene, it would appear that the fighting broke out around the innermost chamber, which was likely the boss's room."

"So, the mimic didn't fight its way in, but started with the head. It's not a bad approach to dealing with punks like this, but why would it even bother?"

"Well, a large portion of their warehouses appeared to have been rummaged through and a looted. We have no idea of what exactly was

taken, but were able to confirm that a large number of weapons, armour and provisions were missing."

"Any signs of our elven Warlock at the scene?"

"Indeed, on the rooftop of the Cracked Flagon," the analyst circled the spot on the map with his pointer. "Not to mention traces of what Arcaneum boys confirmed to be a Warlock's shadow-attuned magic."

"So, the elf and the box walked into the bar, tried to strike a deal that went bad and took the things they wanted with them."

It was a somewhat stereotypical scenario, but that was what made it so believable.

"I'm lacking enough information to make a concrete call on that front," Question noted, "but it seems likely. Especially since our investigation of the Warlock trainer suggested that he had dealings with them."

"That Grimbeard fellow?"

"*Grime*-beard. But yes, him. He was probably the elf's 'in' to the cartel."

"I don't like this," Edward grumbled, scowling. "Too many ifs, likelys and probablys. This isn't like you, Question."

"Hey, I'm not omniscient," the analyst shrugged.

And at least I have the decency to admit it, unlike you, he added internally

"You're thinking something rude, aren't you?" the Spymaster asked sourly.

"No such thing, sir."

Edward didn't need a lie detector to tell him that Question was being dishonest, but the Ultimate Skill certainly helped.

"What was that about the roof?" he asked, trying to get the meeting back on track.

"Oh, right! We found this formation drawn on the rooftop. It was clearly visible under the ice, so our scouts were able to copy it easily enough."

He reached into his robes and brought out a small piece of paper, which he showed to Edward. On it was a diagram of a circle inside a triangle inside a second, bigger circle. Three strange symbols were scribbled in the gaps between the concentric shapes.

"Arcaneum confirmed that this was a formation for a demonic ritual linked with the Demonology Skill," Question explained, "and judging from

the entombed skeletal remains, they were able to complete it successfully. The ritual in question was identified as the Offering to Lulu- Luso-"

He took a brief pause to double check the name written next to the diagram.

"Liusolra?" Zone chimed in.

"Ah, yeah. What she said."

The Spymaster raised his eyebrows.

"Hmm, so there exist fools in this day and age who would perform one of those?"

Edward was aware of these Offerings since he had made a point of educating himself on such matters during his investigation of the Monotal incident. It hadn't taken long before he had concluded that the rituals were nothing more than a grandiose form of suicide. Summoning a big shot demonic Overlord sounded intriguing, but those beings' uncontrollable nature meant that their summoner would almost definitely get caught up in the rampage. In the Spymaster's opinion, anyone willing to sacrifice their fellow man solely to curry favour with a demon deserved everything that happened to them afterwards.

"You're certain that this ritual was the cause of this F-day?"

"That's right," Question confirmed with a nod. "Although Arcaneum couldn't tell me much about the demon in question, they've identified the ice as the result of an ancient Spell called Ice Age. One of the Great Apocalypse Magics that only Overlords have command over."

As the ominous name implied, the Great Apocalypse Magics were incantations to bring about unparalleled destruction. Spells that could literally wipe out entire cities with a single blast, so complex and convoluted that no mortal could ever hope to use them. Not because it was impossible to learn magic not inherent to one's Job, though. It was possible to learn Spells through years of practice and study, but the Great Apocalypse Magics were in a league of their own. Any attempts to replicate them by mortal minds had resulted in failure or madness. The only reason that Arcaneum knew anything about them, including the method to dispel Liusolra's Ice Age, was due to the sealed records detailing past instances where Overlords had been unleashed upon a battlefield.

That, and they had a few Warlocks with Level 10 Demonology on staff.

"Well, that answers the 'how' of things," Edward noted, "but not the 'why.' I really can't see a reason why an elven spy would sacrifice his life

for something like this."

"Oh, the summoner most definitely survived," Question said confidently, completely derailing Edward's train of thought.

"… He did?"

"There's no sign of a body anywhere on or near the rooftop," the analyst explained. "Or, at the very least, not a mortal one. The scouts did report two hollow ice statues, though. They both had horns and were mostly humanoid in appearance, except that one was well over two metres high and the other had wings and rather… outrageous curves. They were undoubtedly left behind by the demons Master Shinji told me about."

"So, the Warlock's familiars got caught up in the Overlord's rampage, but the actual Warlock is nowhere to be seen. Meaning he and that stupid box are probably already across the border, aren't they?"

"Yep," the blond man nodded.

"And we have no way of tracking them."

"Nope."

"Any other witnesses we can probe for information?"

"Not really. Well, there was this one girl, actually. Alea Prinny, an elven Enchanter and Scribe at the local Craftsman's Union."

"Another elf? Why didn't you mention her sooner?"

"Because she's squeaky clean," Question shrugged. "The Union's guild building was outside of the Ice Age's area of effect, so we were able to confirm that she and her family have been loyal Imperial citizens for four generations. We wouldn't have even bothered with her if we hadn't found out that she had contact with the young Underwood."

"What type of contact?"

"The intimate and rigorous kind. I believe the word 'legendary' was brought up at least once."

The afternoon with 'Chester' had been so intense that the elf in question hadn't been able to help blabbing about her tryst, despite the tragedy that had befallen her town. Which was how the Gilded Hand had caught wind of their interaction in the first place, though the investigation had ultimately proved to be a dead end. Most of her coworkers had corroborated her story, claiming that she was rather notorious for having flings with customers, especially if they happened to be younger. Such relations were not against guild policy so long as both parties were above the legal age of fifteen,

which was why Alea had allowed herself to be so vocal about her latest escapade.

"Sounds like our suspect did everything he could to show off, huh?" Edward cupped his chin in thought.

The insultingly obvious trail, the conspicuous attack on the city and the way the elves normally did things all pointed to a single conclusion.

"So, this whole incident… was to send a message, wasn't it?"

"Yep."

The contents of which were quite clear. If the Empire officially declared war on the Republic, then its Foreign Intelligence Bureau would retaliate – with terrible consequences.

"Those fucking twigs!" Edward growled. "They really think they can get away with this!?"

The Spymaster took a few moments to calm himself. Though his pride had been injured, responding to the obvious provocation with knee-jerk anger was precisely what his enemies wanted. Decades of experience had taught him time and again that developments such as these needed to be handled with as little emotion as possible. It was partly why he was so fond of the female aide who had been quietly listening to the conversation this entire time.

"Zone."

"Requesting orders, sir," she responded in her usual flat monotone.

"Send word to our agents across the border," he commanded, his voice level and authoritative. "Tell them to keep a close eye on the Republic's dungeons and make sure that nobody brings out anything suspicious. And that goes double for the dungeons in our own territory. I want to be notified the instant someone even so much as sees a dungeon core."

"Understood."

"Question, give me projections for any targets that the enemy might decide to hit. I also want a threat assessment as to whether they can launch an attack on the capital."

"So, we're still going ahead with this war thing?" Question asked.

"Of course we are. You think those Underwood bastards are just going to let bygones be bygones? We have to hit them before they get a chance to use that Calamity against us. Actually, where's Mist?"

"I think he's out back helping Arcaneum-"

SLAM

"-with… the… thawing…"

The Spymaster had left the room, slamming the door behind him before Question could even finish his sentence.

"Crazy old bastard has no chill," he mumbled under his breath.

"Requesting a moment of your time, Question."

"Hmm? What is it, Zone? Finally fallen for my natural good looks, superior intellect and charming attitude?" he grinned. "It's okay if you want to leap into my arms and embrace me at any time."

"Wanna die?"

The icy bloodlust in those two simple words caused the analyst to break out in cold sweat. He sometimes forgot that the Spymaster was hardly the only one with a deficit in the chill department.

"… N-no, I'm good… So, uh, what do you need?"

"Have you considered the likelihood that this elf and our mimic are one and the same?"

"Of course I have," the blond man scoffed.

"And?"

"And… what? It's impossible."

"Completely, absolutely, one hundred percent impossible?"

"… This is unlike you, Zone."

"Insisting that you answer the question, Question. It's all you're good for anyway."

"Haaah," he sighed. "Well, no. It's *theoretically* possible, if the monster managed to obtain the Essence Concealment Skill. Nothing else could possibly fool an Appraisal. Even if the guy in the guild was in cahoots with them, the gate guard definitely would have noticed. But I don't know of any god that would be crazy enough to make that creature into its Hero."

"What if there was one?"

"Even if that miracle were to somehow happen, Essence Concealment can only make one appear weaker, not stronger. Meaning that if the mimic was indeed the elf in disguise, then it would have had to find a way to reclaim its Warlock Job and raise it back up to Level 25. And train its related Skills to that high a degree. And Rank Up into a species capable of disguising itself so completely."

He gave an exaggerated shrug.

"I just don't see a way anything could accomplish all that in under a month. Especially considering the average monster Level on that mountain.

I mean, the reports even said that our elf had a personal steel golem of an insanely high quality and was carrying a sizeable sum of money in addition to a high-class staff. Where would a *box* find the opportunity, not to mention the resources, to obtain such things?"

Question finished his explanation with another sigh.

"Honestly, the odds that this Chester Underwood and Boxxy T. Morningwood are one and the same are so astronomically low that they might as well be negative."

"I see," Zone replied after a brief pause. "Expressing gratitude for your cooperation."

She gave the analyst a small nod and calmly stepped out of the room. She proceeded along the hallway and headed down the steps towards the first floor. But there was something different about her. The corners of her mouth were turned ever so slightly upwards, an actual smile on her normally emotionless, doll-like face.

She tightened her grip around the piece of torn parchment under her cloak. She had found it yesterday, assuming it to be just another soggy piece of litter, but it had turned out to be some sort of letter or message. And, although the ink had smudged a bit due to the water damage, the contents of the exceptionally-silky parchment were still largely legible. Zone's first thought had been to hand it over to her colleagues for analysis, and under normal circumstances she would have done so.

But these were not, in fact, normal circumstances. Not when she had seen that the first two words of the message were, 'Dear Boxxy.'

Afterword

Thus ends Boxxy T. Morningwood's reign as the chest with the best. It honestly felt a bit weird having to make it abandon its pleasantly-rectangular mimic self, but it had to grow up sometime. I could say the same about Fizzy, as she was a character that, at the time of her conception, was never intended to live past the climax of Volume 2. I grew a bit attached and wanted to keep her around, but to do that she had to undergo some… unpleasantness. I tried to play her off as something like a Harley to Boxxy's Joker, but the parallels are kind of lost considering the attempted seriousness of the main character. Still, she was an inspired member of the team, and I feel I did my best to make her transition from wimpy tinkerer to heavy metal badass as believable as possible.

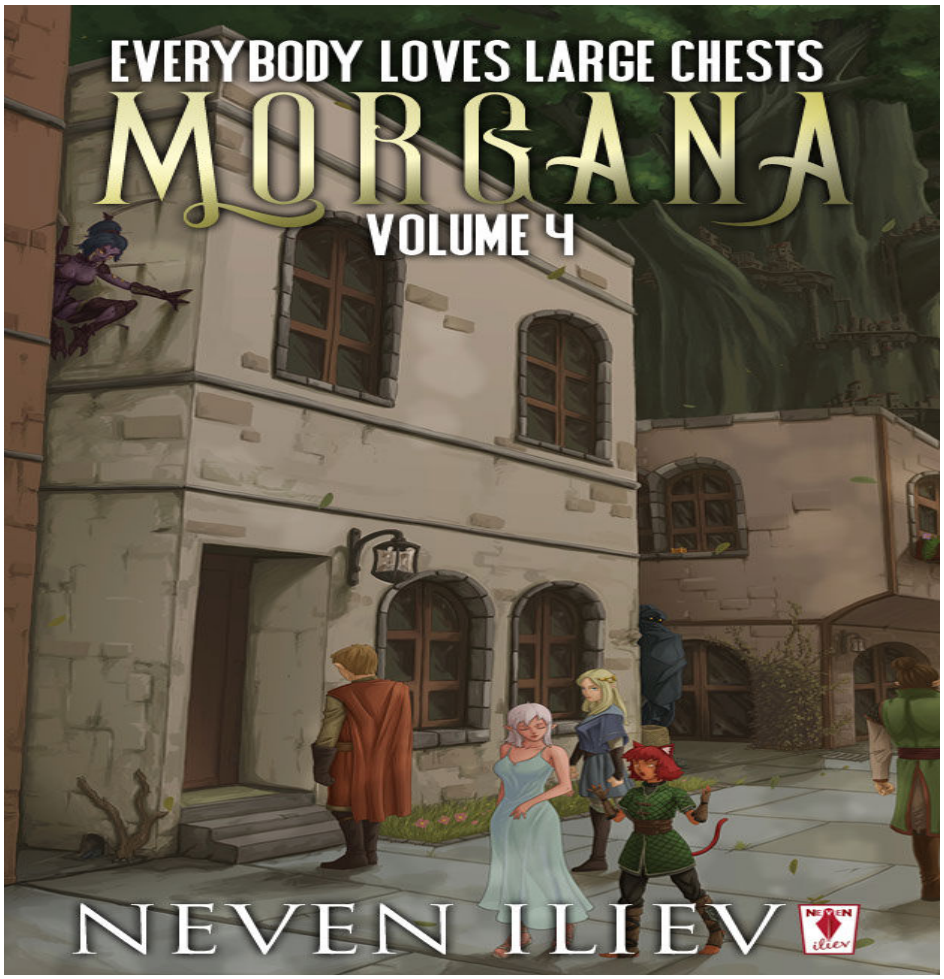
Nasty, on the other hand, was a failure. I wanted to re-introduce her as a long-term ally, but the chemistry just wasn't there. All of the others were only begrudgingly letting her live at their boss's behest, and she would have been a constant cause of friction since liches are not nearly as well accepted in my world's society as shapely golem-girls. So, she had to be disposed of once her usefulness had dried up. I actually feel quite happy with how I portrayed the Mimic's mind as what were essentially pixels. Makes you realise that with a thought process like that, it's no wonder so many things seem to 'click' for our mass-murdering monster.

Physical shapes aside, another thing that will be coming to an end is Boxxy's lifestyle as a murder-hobo. Finding and establishing a lair, building a reputation, forging relationships with actual people and lying through its teeth so much it's a wonder it doesn't get cavities. Oh, and making a treasure hoard. Can't forget the shinies. Not to mention exploring and experimenting with human cuisine. As in dishes made from humans. Gruesome? Yes. Tasty? Yes. Amoral? Nobody cares.

But yes, long story short, the next installment of the series will see Boxxy take root in civilised society, and all the trouble and tribulations that come with trying to hide one's appetite in public. Look forward to it!

Lastly I'd like to give a shout out to the GameLit Society (https://www.facebook.com/groups/LitRPGsociety/) for being chill, accepting and all around awesome. If you're looking for something to scratch that leveling itch, that's your place.

EVERYBODY LOVES LARGE CHESTS
MORGANA
VOLUME 4
NEVEN ILIEV


EVERYBODY LOVES LARGE CHESTS
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VOLUME 4
NEVEN ILIEV

Everybody Loves Large Chests

Volume Four: Morgana

A book by Neven Iliev

Prologue

Rowana Slyth was an elf that many people would not hesitate to describe as ‘the ideal woman.’ She was smart, caring, responsible and gentle, a true delight to be around. She also cut quite the attractive figure with her slim waist, wide hips and plump bosom. Her face possessed a refined sort of beauty, with bright emerald green eyes, smooth pink skin and just the slightest hint of makeup to accentuate her features. She also had straight silky hair that she had dyed platinum white, which fell down to her shoulders like a waterfall.

In short, she was about as feminine as a person could get, though this was by no means accidental. Rowana put a lot of work into maintaining her stunning looks through a combination of eating right, regular exercise and mild alchemical treatments. Her efforts extended into the clothes she wore too, as the elf always seemed to wear something that was both tasteful and practical.

That day, for instance, she was dressed in a long-sleeved white blouse, tight blue trousers and flat-heeled sandals. She had only just gotten off work and felt too tired and hungry to cook for herself like usual, which was why she was enjoying a hearty soup at a pub near her home. One would imagine a woman like her would prefer far more extravagant establishments than this common eatery, but that was not the case.

Despite having an air of class and refinement, Rowana was surprisingly frugal. Kind waitstaff, good food and agreeable prices were far more important to her than opulence and luxury. She did occasionally get approached by random men trying to hit on the clearly single beauty in the corner, but she kindly, yet firmly informed them she had zero interest in pursuing a romantic relationship. Granted, that wasn’t entirely true, but it required a lot less explanation than the real reason. Most potential suitors got the message and left her alone, but there were some men that required a bit of extra… convincing. Especially if they’ve had a few pints already.

In fact, there was one such potential troublemaker in the restaurant on that night. An older elf with oily green hair, dressed in a rather fancy looking robe with several golden rings on his fingers. Rowana had spotted him

sitting at a table near the entrance and wisely chose a seat that was as far away from him as possible. Her judgement, while somewhat shallow, had proven to be right on the money as the man ordered one drink after another. With every beverage he consumed, his words grew louder and more inappropriate. The owner even asked him to keep his voice down and seemed to be on the verge of kicking him out for bothering the other patrons.

The tipping point came when a rather odd sight entered the restaurant. It was a young girl, no more than fifteen or sixteen years of age. She had tan skin, yellow eyes and, most eye-catching of all, bright crimson hair with a pair of triangular feline ears sticking out at the top. A slender tail with short fur matching her hair color dangled from her lower back, making it abundantly clear that she was neither elf nor human, but a beastkin of the cat variety. She also had a cute face, but the weary expression and worn-down travel clothes were not doing her any favors in Rowana's personal opinion.

She still stood out plenty though, as the entire pub full of elves couldn't help but at least glance at the curious visitor. Unfortunately, the aforementioned drunkard did more than simply gawk at her. Though Rowana couldn't hear his remark over the murmur of the crowd, she clearly saw him slap the catgirl on the bottom as she passed by. Followed immediately by her turning around and clawing at his extended arm.

"Yeeeow!"

The man let out a sharp yell of pan as he stood up, clutching his injured hand. The entire pub went silent as a trickle of crimson liquid ran down the man's arm.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" he shouted at her.

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you?!" she snapped back at him. "You lay your filthy hand on me again and I'll do more than just draw blood!"

"Crazy bitch! Do you have any idea who I am?"

"You're clearly a lecherous asshole for one!"

SLAM

An armed guard in silver-colored plate armor burst into the establishment through the front door, interrupting the loud argument just as it was about to go into full swing.

“What’s going on in here, then?” he asked loudly.

“This looney bint just attacked me for no reason!” the drunkard claimed while raising his bleeding forearm.

“I did not!” the catgirl argued.

“Then how do you explain my bleedin’ arm?!”

“I mean, I did do that, but only because he slapped my butt out of nowhere!”

“I didn’t mean anything by it. It was an accident!”

“No, it wasn’t. I bet you being born was one, though!”

The guard let out a tired sigh as the two continued bickering back and forth. He had only just finished his shift when this sudden civil dispute interrupted his walk back to the barracks. Part of him wanted to ignore it, but he wasn’t technically off duty until he reported back to his superior. His patience at an end, the guard grabbed each party by a shoulder.

“Alright, that’s enough out of you two,” he cautioned. “Why don’t you come with me and we’ll sort this out later?”

“She started it!”

“But he was the one who-”

“Yes, yes, I’m sure it’s a fascinating tale. The boys back at the guard post will be thrilled to hear all about it.”

He magnificently ignored their complaints and almost literally dragged them outside. He was clearly intending to lock them both up and let the next shift sort this mess out. He had barely made it out of the door, before a soft voice called out to him from behind.

“Excuse me, sir?”

The man turned around to see Rowana standing there with a concerned look.

“Yes, madam?”

“I clearly saw that man try to molest this girl.”

“The fuck do you mean ‘molest,’ you cuuuuaaaaaah!”

The guard squeezed down on the drunkard’s shoulder hard enough to turn his cussing into a painful scream.

“Quiet, you,” he warned him before turning his attention back to the woman. “You’re certain of this, miss?”

“Yes, sir. The girl was merely trying to defend herself. He was the one at fault, so could you please let her go?”

The redhead looked at Rowana, her yellow feline eyes widening in surprise.

“Even if that’s true, I can’t ignore the fact that she openly admitted to physical assault,” he shook his head. “The law is quite clear on this—once an altercation turns violent, I have to detain all parties involved.”

“Are you really going to throw this poor girl in a cell after she just got here?” Rowana pleaded.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Look at her, she’s clearly a foreigner that came from very far away. She probably doesn’t know how reliable and honorable our guardsmen are and didn’t think to find one when this guy accosted her. Can’t you give her a pass this one time?”

“I don’t know, I really shouldn’t do stuff like that…”

“Think of it this way, is making this spirited girl spend her first night in Azurvale in a dungeon worth the paperwork?”

“… You do realize I’d have to let them both go, yes?”

“I don’t think either of them mind.”

Both the drunkard and the catgirl vigorously shook their heads to show that no, they most certainly did not.

“Fine. I’ll let it slide this time,” the guard finally conceded. “You’re both free to go, just don’t let me catch you stirring up trouble again.”

He released his grip on the redhead, but didn’t let the other one go until after he’d escorted him away from the other two.

“You, uh, you didn’t really need to do that,” the girl said nervously. “But… Umm… Th-thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Rowana said with a sweet smile. “I’d just hate to see someone locked up over something that wasn’t their fault.”

“… Actually, wouldn’t I have gotten free food and lodging if I was taken away? Maybe I should…”

The deadpan seriousness of that grim notion left Rowana momentarily speechless. Was she actually that desperate to find such basic things? No, that look in her eyes as she watched the two men walk down the street made it abundantly clear she was contemplating punching one of them in the face just so she’d get a belly full of food. Though Rowana had only met this beastkin, there was no way she could allow something that pitiful to transpire.

“Nonsense!” the elf declared, startling the younger redhead. “I didn’t go through all that trouble just to have you throw yourself in chains, did I?”

“Uh, well, no, but-”

“No buts, young lady. If you’re really that hard up to get something to eat, then why don’t you come back inside and order anything you want. My treat.”

“… Just like that?”

“Just like that,” the woman nodded. “Think of this as my apology on behalf of all elvenkind for that asshole’s behavior.”

“W-well, when you put it like that, it would be rude of me to decline, wouldn’t it?” she smiled weakly.

“That’s the spirit. I’m Rowana, by the way. What’s your name?”

“It’s Keira.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Keira. Lovely name, by the way.”

“Uh, you think so?”

“Absolutely,” the elf nodded. “I dare say it fits you splendidly.”

“Ehehehe,” the girl let out an embarrassed giggle.

“Now, let’s forget about that unpleasantry and get to know each other a little better over dinner.”

“Sure thing!”

The two of them then went back inside the pub and proceeded to do just that.

When Rowana woke up the next morning, she felt something soft and warm wrapped around her left arm. When she opened her hazy eyes, the first thing that bobbed into view was a mass of red with two triangular protrusions poking out of it. She blinked once, then twice, then rubbed the sleep out of her eyes with her right hand. It took a few more seconds to sink in, but she was able to confirm that yes, that was Keira currently wrapped around her left arm. In the same bed. *Her* bed. While both of them were completely naked.

The elf broke out into a nervous sweat when last night’s memories finally came back to her. This was most certainly not what she had in mind when she told this girl she’d like to ‘get to know each other.’ Yet they still somehow ended up doing lewd things to each other until they passed out, which mortified Rowana. Was she really capable of doing something this sleazy? Granted, she did feel frustrated because she wasn’t brave enough to publicly reveal her sexuality and actively look for a girlfriend, but that didn’t justify taking advantage of this girl.

This innocent, vulnerable, awkward, sweet, adorable, and surprisingly energetic girl.

“Hehehe…” Keira giggled in her sleep. “Silly rabbit, that’s not how cows work…”

Rowana couldn’t help but smile as she pondered what kind of bizarre dream would warrant that sort of remark. The more she looked at how peaceful the

girl seemed, the more her own erratic thoughts calmed down. She realized that, while odd and somewhat questionable, this outcome was hardly the end of the world. Just the opposite, actually.

If the elf played her cards right, then maybe, just maybe, the stray cat she picked up last night might stick around for a while.

Especially considering how eager said ‘stray cat’ was to get ‘sticky’ with Rowana, though the tortured analogy made the elf feel as if she should apologize to Keira later.

Chapter One
Moonlighting

Part One

“Hmmnn…”

A soft groan filled the messy room as one of its occupants gradually woke from her slumber. A slender girl with platinum blonde hair and pointed ears rose from the double bed while yawning pleasantly. She rubbed the sleep from her emerald-green eyes as she lazily looked around her modest, single-room home.

There was a stone oven embedded halfway into the wooden wall opposite the bed. It had a rectangular brick chimney sticking out of it and up into the ceiling. The corner immediately to the left side of the stove held a plain dining table with three chairs lazily strewn around it. To the right of the stove was a simple wooden cabinet filled with dishes, jugs and other eating utensils. A sturdy-looking desk with a few quills, an inkwell and a small pile of paper stood opposite that cabinet, next to the same wall that the bed was up against. A few chests and drawers were lined up on the other side of the bed, under the only window in the house. Needless to say, those held the residents’ few worldly possessions such as clothes, mementos and-

“Window?” mumbled the young elf.

Why was the window important? This was most definitely her window, exactly the same as it was the night before. So, why did it seem so out of place? True, the double-glass panes were so filthy that barely any sunlight got through, but she liked it better this way. Having too much light pour in from that side of the room was annoying, if she wanted to focus on her work.

“Sunlight?” she mumbled again. She blinked her eyes a few more times before she realized what had happened.

“Sunlight!” Rowana suddenly shouted. “Keira, wake up!”

She shook her new girlfriend awake, prompting her fiery red hair and plainly cute face to emerge from underneath the covers.

“Keira!”

The cat-eared girl slowly turned her head to face the panicked elf. Her dull expression blossomed into a full-blown, open-mouthed smile.

“Hehee! Good morning, Roowieee!”

She leaned forward and wrapped the other woman in a tight hug, her slender tail waving about happily as she rubbed her cheek against Rowana’s.

“Yes, I’m happy to see you too,” the elf pushed her off, “but you need to go! You’ll be late!”

“Hmm? Late?”

“Yeah! The sun’s already out! Didn’t you have a thing to do today?!”

“… Oh, crap!”

Keira’s yellow, cat-like eyes became wide as dinner plates as she realized Rowana was right. She leapt out of bed, grabbed the shortbow leaning against the wall and went for the front door at the far end of the room.

“Wait!” the older woman screamed. “You’re forgetting something!”

“Ah! Of course! How silly of me!”

The catgirl ran back to the bed and gave the elf a big, wet kiss on the mouth. Their lips separated several seconds later with a loud smack.

“I was about to leave without giving you a goodbye kiss!”

“N-not that!” the blushing elf exclaimed. “Clothes, Keira! Put on some clothes!”

The red-haired catgirl was about to run out into the street completely naked. Although Rowana appreciated the sight of her girlfriend’s slim figure, tanned skin and small-yet-firm breasts, she didn’t particularly feel like sharing it with the rest of the city.

“Wow! That was close!” Keira said as she started getting dressed.

“Honestly! How are you this much of an airhead!?” the elf complained in a huff.

“It’s your fault!” the other girl shot back while pulling up her custom-tailored leather pants. “If you didn’t want to cuddle in the nude until late last night, then I wouldn’t have overslept!”

“I-I can’t help it, okay? Your skin just feels way too good against mine!”

“That’s why you couldn’t,” Keira paused for a second as she pulled her chainmail tunic over her head, “couldn’t get a girlfriend for so long! You’re way too selfish!”

“Really, now?” the elf raised an eyebrow. “You certainly didn’t seem to mind it last night.”

“W-well, I wasn’t running late at the time.”

The pair shared an embarrassed chuckle as Rowana idly watched her new sweetheart get ready. Keira put on a pair of wrist-length fingerless gloves made of the same gray leather material as her trousers. But the more the elf looked on, the more concerned she grew.

“You be careful out there, alright?” the elf cautioned after a brief pause.

“I’ll be fine, Rowie,” a smiling Keira reassured her. “Mister Faehorn said we’ll just be doing some light termite hunting today. Our class average is barely Level 10, so I’m sure he won’t make us do anything reckless.”

“He’s not bullying you, right? I heard some bad things about that guy…”

“No idea who you were talking to, but they’re wrong. Sure, he acts all tough and distant, but that’s just because he takes his job seriously. He’s only hard on us students because he cares about us. Plus, he doesn’t treat me differently even though I’m not an elf.”

“Hmmm… I guess he’s unexpectedly a nice guy, huh?”

Rowana watched in silence as the beastkin pulled a dark-green cloth tunic over her chainmail armor and slung an empty quiver across her shoulder. Once that was in place, she put on a pair of metal-plated bracers on her forearms, and finished up by buckling a set of matching shin guards to her lower legs and ankles.

“There, all done,” she declared while doing a little spin to show off.

“No shoes, though?” asked the elf while glancing at her lover’s bare feet.

“Ah, mister Faehorn says a true Ranger must be in tune with his or her surroundings at all times, so going barefoot is a must!”

While most of the aged elf’s other students were of the opinion that this sort of thinking was outdated and old-fashioned, Keira took his words to heart. She considered herself extremely lucky to be able to study under a famous adventurer like him, so she wasn’t going to let a single drop of his wisdom go to waste. Besides, she didn’t particularly mind it, as feeling the grass between her toes felt oddly nice and she was already used to pebbles and twigs digging into her soles.

“Keira, one more thing before you go. Can you forego your after-class walk and be back here by sundown?”

“Whaaat? But the night breeze feels so good around here!”

“I know, but yesterday I heard more news about that crazy vigilante that appeared recently.”

“Hm? Oh, you mean that Sandman character? Isn’t he one of the good guys, though?”

“He kills people, Keira! There’s no way that’s a ‘good guy,’ no matter how you look at it!”

“So, what, he should just have a nice chat with the murderers, rapists and slavers?”

“No! But, I mean, surely even they don’t deserve to be killed off without a fair trial!” the elf argued.

“The only reason you can say that sort of thing is because you’ve never been a victim.”

Keira’s uncharacteristically cold words and grim expression made the elf realize she said something she shouldn’t have.

“I’m… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

“It’s fine. It’s not your fault.”

The elf had momentarily forgotten that her new sweetheart carried some deep scars from her childhood, despite being only sixteen years old. The beastkin had already stated that the whole reason she came to this country in the first place was so she could escape her past, so Rowana felt terrible for unintentionally digging it up. Sure, she didn't know the specifics, but she didn't need to. All that mattered was that she would be there for Keira the moment the oddly energetic and slightly airheaded girl felt like sharing her sorrows.

The beastkin grabbed her shortbow once more, made sure her backup dagger was on her belt, and turned towards the exit to the hovel.

"I'll be going then. See you tonight," she said in a dry, monotone voice while looking over her shoulder.

"No you don't! Let me make it up to you!" insisted the elf. "What sort of girlfriend am I if I send you off with a distraught face like that?!"

"Rowie, I'll be okay. You don't have to-"

"Nonsense! Just have to think of something good… Oh, I know! I'll make your favorite steamed salmon for dinner, so look forward to it!"

"Really?! Alright! You're the best!"

Seeing her lover cheer up in an instant was enough to put a beaming smile on the elf's face.

"I am pretty great, aren't I?" she declared smugly. "Go on, now. And stay safe out there, love!"

"I always do!"

Keira walked out the front door in high spirits and breathed in the fresh morning air while looking up at the sky. Far above her head was the loose canopy formed by a dozen or so hylt trees, much like the one Rowana's house was attached to. These magnificent plants grew to a dizzying height of nearly a kilometer and had served as traditional homes to the elves since time immemorial.

Or at least that's how it was here in Azurvale, the capital of the Ishigar Republic. Elaborate residences of various sizes and shapes were carved into

the side of the tree's thick trunk or built along its colossal branches as if they were streets. Countless suspension bridges connected one hylt tree to another while sprawling wooden walkways spanned between neighboring limbs forming plazas.

All in all, about a third of the city's eighty thousand residents lived inside or around the colossal tree trunks, though only up to an altitude of about two hundred meters. The rest of the locals made their homes on the ground, where they were surrounded on all sides by the hylt trees' gigantic, exposed roots. This created a natural wall, turning the city into a nigh-impregnable fortress. For not only were those roots tens of meters thick and just as tall, but the Ironbark that covered every part of a hylt tree was heavily resistant to both physical impact and magical bombardment.

Rowana's house wasn't built on the ground. It was a cozy little hovel built into the side of the hylt tree's colossal trunk, near the upper edge of the district's residential area. This placed it a good one hundred and forty meters above ground level, which was more than a little inconvenient to someone like Keira. She, like all new arrivals to Azurvale, had been unused to living in a city with a third dimension to it. That hadn't lasted last long though, as the aspiring adventurer had already gotten used to navigating this strangely vertical place.

The catgirl took a running start and leapt without hesitation from the large wooden platform that served as Rowana's front yard. A sea of dull-red rooftops sprawled out beneath her as her small body dropped towards them like a rock. Her arms reached out and grabbed one of the many vines that dangled from the street-sized branch directly overhead, her forward momentum causing the rope-like plant to sway back and forth wildly. Undisturbed by the erratic, lateral motion, she wrapped her legs and arms around it and let herself slide downward with practiced ease.

Once she reached the end of it, she threw herself off and landed deftly onto the slanted roof of one of the buildings that was erected at the ground level. Taking another small run, she leapt down from the three-story-high rooftop, kicked off the wall of the neighboring building to redirect her momentum and landed on the mossy ground with a small roll for a perfect ten-point landing.

THWACK

"Ow!"

A wooden cane bonked her on the head.

"What gives?!" she protested while turning around. She discovered her assailant to be a wrinkled old elf with balding gray hair, a slightly hunched back and a peeved look in his eye.

"Oh, it's only Pedro," she mumbled while rubbing her head.

"Don't 'Pedro' me, you hooligan!" he admonished her. "How many times do I have to tell you to stop doing that sort of thing!"

"How else am I supposed to get down, then?"

Although cozy, Rowana's small house was located in a really awkward part of the neighborhood. Keira had to go all the way down to ground level or climb up to the thick branch further up the tree if she wanted to access any of the city's shops, guilds or services. At the very least, the government had installed a robust plumbing infrastructure into every tree, so those living in the upper levels didn't have to worry about clean drinking water or waste disposal.

It was also no surprise that Keira's vine-swinging shenanigans were by no means the standard method of changing one's altitude.

"Use the public elevators like the rest of us!"

That particular function was fulfilled by the devices the old elf shouted about as he waved his cane around. There were dozens of house-sized floating platforms that served to provide the city's residents with easy vertical access to all major levels of a hylt tree. One merely had to patiently wait at a designated station for one of those enchanted slabs of Ironbark to float by. The automated elevator would stop briefly to recharge its mana and let people get on or off of it before moving onto the next stop along its route.

"Those elevators don't stop anywhere near our house!" Keira protested.

"Then use the damned walkways! That's what they're there for!" Pedro kept scolding her.

Those who were unwilling or unable to use the elevators still had the option of traveling up and down the large ramps and staircases that spiraled around the trunk of every hylt tree. That was how the elves of old typically got around before those magical floating platforms became commonplace. All things said and done, the number of people in Azurvale who performed elaborate acrobatics just to get from A to B could be counted on one hand.

“But doing it my way is much faster!” the catgirl insisted as she stood up. “Besides, it’s super fun!”

“Fun?! You’re going to get yourself killed if you keep it up. Not to mention, you’ll ruin the roof tiles of my inn. And my guests are already complaining about the racket you make up there every morning. How are you going to reimburse me if my business suffers because of your careless behavior, huh!?”

“Crap! That’s right, I’m late!”

The girl then suddenly remembered the whole reason she had to land on this geezer’s building in the first place.

“I can’t waste my time around here. Catch you later, Pedro!”

“And for the last time, my name is not Pedro!”

Keira ran off towards her destination while magnificently ignoring the elder elf’s protests about some ‘crazy whippersnapper.’ She’d be in big trouble if she missed today’s outing, as Faehorn was about as strict as an instructor could get. Even if she managed to catch up with the rest of her group, she’d likely still have to suffer some sort of punishment for her tardiness, the scale of which would be directly proportional to how late she was.

That’s why she wasn’t using just her legs, but ran through the streets on all fours. Beastkin like her had a natural aptitude for quadruped running and an innate agility that made them considerably faster than any other enlightened species. Keira demonstrated these traits magnificently as her graceful, coordinated movements allowed her to move at nearly double the speed of her ‘human’ way of running. Granted it was also far more tiring, but this was an emergency.

In her haste, Keira ended up causing quite a bit of trouble for the people she passed on the streets. She ducked under carriages, leapt over stalls, swung around street lights, charged between people's legs and other such unbridled behavior. While she didn't really cause any property damage, that wasn't to say she didn't startle the crap out of a lot of bystanders.

One such person was a stocky elven housewife who was carrying a bucket of water when the beastkin girl suddenly zoomed past her at breakneck speed. The old woman got startled, causing her to drop her bucket on top of an old, disused well she was walking past. Although the rusty grating covering the top prevented the bucket from falling through, the clean water inside it ended up spilling out into the dried-up water hole. And although the old housewife was more than a little perturbed at this turn of events, the one who was the most upset about the situation was a certain fiend at the bottom of that well.

"GAH! What the fuck?!" Kora screamed as the cold water splashed over her head.

"Be quiet, you moron!" Xera chastised her in a harsh whisper. "This area is off limits, remember?! Nobody's supposed to know we're down here!"

"Yeah, I know, I know."

The two demons continued scouring the old, disused tunnels as they had been doing for the past week or so. The reason Xera and Kora were down there to begin with was because their master had been searching for a good place to establish a hidden lair ever since it infiltrated the city twelve days ago. It couldn't just pick any old place for this, because it wanted to make a home base using the dungeon core it had stolen from the Spire of the Jade King. The blue crystal orb had shrunk down to about fifty centimeters in diameter once it completely lost its MP charge and had been sitting quietly in Boxxy's Storage ever since.

However, in order to properly establish a dungeon, the crystalline core needed to be installed in an environment that already had a high concentration of ambient mana. The ex-mimic had learned that those colossal plants the elves used as living spaces were magical in nature. They pulled vast amounts of mana up from the soil in order to sustain themselves,

which sounded like just the thing it was looking for. After all, there was bound to be an overflowing stream of magical energy coursing through the ground somewhere near or under those gigantic roots.

That space was where this ancient, decrepit series of tunnels came into play. Unfortunately, it was unmapped and in horrible disrepair. Searching through this literal maze of tight, winding passages based on nothing more than simple assumption was not the most productive use of Boxxy's time. The shapeshifting monster was already hard at work establishing a new identity within the city, so it had neither the opportunity nor desire to waste time and energy on a wild-goose chase. Thankfully, it had two entirely subservient demons who could be volunteered to do the grunt work in its stead.

"I just don't see why that damned pipsqueak was the one who got the fun assignment," Kora complained as she cleared out a collapsed section of the tunnel.

"Because she actually knows the value of gold. Unlike you, who only knows the value of a tight hole."

"… Okay, can't argue with that."

"Besides, it will be a good opportunity for that girl to spread the Progenitor's name, not to mention practice her anti-personnel combat."

Fizzy's current assignment was something of a win-win-win, no matter how one looked at it. Well, provided she didn't go and get herself killed while fulfilling her duty, but that was unlikely. Mostly because the Rank Up she underwent upon hitting Level 25 of her Metal Golem Job had made her far too durable to fall to the rabble she battled.

"Yo, bubble-butt," Kora called. "I think I see something."

The fiend had just opened a small hole in the pile of rubble blocking their way and was peering through it. Xera leaned in and put her cheek next to Kora's in order to get a look for herself. And indeed, just as the red-skinned meathead had said, there was a lit torch visible on the other side of the tunnel. They heard distant shouts echoing down the corridor, though they couldn't make out the words.

Having stumbled upon a possible target, the succubus immediately contacted Boxxy through their telepathic link.

“Master, sorry to disturb your practice, but I think we found another group down here.”

Xera and Kora were hardly the only ones skulking through these ancient sewer tunnels, as many gangs and other unsavory elements often hid out down there. This was the third time the two demons had discovered such a place. The first time was when they stumbled upon an illegal slave market. With the second occurrence, they found a weird underground pub that could only be described as a wretched hive of pickpockets, thieves, con artists and other assorted scum and villainy. Needless to say, none of those people survived their encounter with Boxxy and its familiars.

“Have you been spotted?” the shapeshifter inquired.

“No. Not yet, at least. But we can see lights and hear voices.”

“Then stand by and keep an eye on things. I’ll come clean them up in a few hours.”

And it would appear that ‘Mister Sandman’ was about to make yet another appearance.

Part Two

“Snack, get ready for the transfer.”

Boxxy’s sudden telepathic communication caught Xera slightly off-guard. She and Kora had been on standby for the past couple of hours, ever since they found traces of life in the old sewer tunnels. Of course, in their case standby meant that the fiend was exploring some moist tunnels of her own. However, as fun as the act was, it was hardly the ideal position for what was about to happen next, so the fiend hurriedly pulled out of Xera’s ass and put her manly side away.

“Ready, Master,” reported the still out-of-breath succubus.

Several seconds passed in silence as Xera braced herself for what was to come. Her body suddenly started shaking, vibrating even. It grew blurry, almost as if it were out of focus, and then grew slightly transparent. There was a soft, barely-audible popping noise followed by a puff of thick, green smoke that came out from around her feet with a vague scent of sulfur. The smoke cleared a second later and Xera was gone. In her place was a faceless, child-sized, black-skinned humanoid monster.

Boxxy grumbled slightly as it curled up on the floor and wrapped itself in its favorite chest-shaped shell. Even if it had gotten more or less used to humanoid forms by now, this was still far more comfortable. It was just a pity that it didn’t get a lot of opportunities where it could assume this form in peace since it had to work on maintaining a fake identity.

“What should I do, Master?” Xera asked through the telepathic link.

“Stay out of sight until I have to go back. This shouldn’t take long.”

The doppelganger pretending to be a mimic, pretending to be a chest had just used a Spell called Transfamiliar. It was a type of teleportation that allowed the Warlock and one of its familiars to change places by tapping into the reality-warping energy of the Beyond. The spell employed radically different principles to the more traditional spatial magic, which was why it differed in function and application.

As for how Boxxy had obtained knowledge of this oddly named Spell, that was because of its most recently acquired Warlock Skill.

[Demonic Insight]
The Warlock's connection with the demonic realm allows him to tap into the unstable powers of the Beyond.
Requirements: Level 35 Warlock, Demonology
Type: Passive
Range: Self
[Effects]
Grants knowledge of a Demonic Spell at Level 1, 3, 6, 8 and 10 of this Skill.
Increases the effectiveness of the INT Attribute by 1% per Level of this Skill.

This was the monster's third demon-related Skill after Summon Familiar and Demonology. It was a natural choice to strengthen its familiars further, especially since Snack and Arms were the main way it applied its Warlock Job. Both of them were excellent minions that were just the right combination of dependable, flexible and expendable. Also, the demonic duo would soon gain an extra member, as the monster's Demonology Skill was poised to reach Level 8 within the week. Hitting that milestone would give Boxxy access to a third summoning contract, and it was eagerly anticipating having another minion around to do its bidding.

Unfortunately, the Demonic Insight Skill didn't seem particularly useful on its own. The rather modest boost to the monster's INT Attribute was welcome, but the Spells it provided seemed oriented towards utility rather than defense or offense. This wasn't necessarily a bad thing, though.

Transfamiliar, which was gained at Level 3 of the Skill, was quite the convenient Spell, although it did have an obnoxious, long chant. At least that drawback was alleviated somewhat by the Chant Reduction Skill the mimic had acquired at Warlock Level 30. This passive Skill did exactly what its name implied, allowing the monster to activate all of its Spells a bit faster by skipping certain parts of their chants without affecting their effectiveness.

"Arms, where's the prey?" Boxxy asked once it had gotten its bearings.

“Over there, behind that rubble,” Kora pointed towards the collapsed section of the tunnel.

Boxxy walked up to the pile of rubble and peered through the small, head-sized opening its familiar had made earlier. It saw the swaying, reddish light of torches and heard distant voices. This place was most definitely home to someone, which meant it was a perfect spot for it to feed on people without attracting too much unwanted attention. The relatively simple plan was the same since it crossed the border.

Unfortunately, things hadn’t worked out quite as expected. Boxxy’s first order of business upon arriving in Azurvale had been to seek out some unsavory criminal elements in order to unload the Empire-forged arms and armor it had ‘acquired.’ While it had no trouble finding buyers, it did have a disagreement with them concerning the price. The representatives it met with demanded that Boxxy sell them its goods for the nominal price of ‘fuck all,’ which was obviously unacceptable.

Finding themselves at an impasse, the two parties then engaged in an intense bout of negotiation. When an amicable agreement wasn’t reached, the mimic kindly requested to meet with the employer of these stubborn individuals to work things out like gentlemen. It was a request to which those fellows rejected but ultimately accommodated.

Long story short, an established crime boss, thirty of his top men and everything of value they owned all disappeared without a trace overnight. Word of this shocking event spread through the city like wildfire. That particular criminal was known to have connections to many influential people and was largely considered untouchable. He was known for bribery, blackmail, taking hostages and all other sorts of other underhanded methods to keep the authorities out of his hair.

So, it really should have come as no surprise that having his mansion ransacked, smashed up and partially burned down would be big news. The dire state his place of residence had been found in made it abundantly clear that its residents did not meet a pleasant fate, especially since there had been a notable absence of bodies at the scene. It was as if a vengeful tornado of violence and anger had swept through the underground

organization, leaving behind nothing more than a collection of splintered wood, shattered stone and bloody smears.

That was hardly the end of it. The bizarre event repeated itself the very next day as another allegedly criminal organization was dismantled completely, including their illegal slavery racket. Following this was the news that an underground guild of thieves and robbers was wiped out the day after in much the same way. Two underground gambling dens and an illegal drug laboratory followed suit within the week.

It didn't take long for the people of Azurvale to conclude that someone was systematically targeting and wiping out these criminal outfits. The rumors spoke of an ominous figure lurking in the shadows, pursuing either their own brand of justice or exacting bloody vengeance on those who had wronged them. It didn't take long for the people to start referring to this mysterious individual as 'the Sandman.'

However, the vigilante in question had no idea as to why they were calling it that. True, Boxxy's Cadaver Absorption Skill turned dead bodies into black ashes that could be seen as sand-like, but the locals wouldn't know that. Boxxy planned to stick around Azurvale for quite a while, so it made sure to clean up after itself in order to make it harder for both the authorities and that terrifying Spymaster to track it down. It carried buckets, mops, alchemical solvents, and several jugs of clean water inside its Storage for this express purpose. It could, of course, simply eat the ashes, but it didn't want to do that unless it really had to. After all, they tasted worse than literal dirt.

Yet despite its best efforts, the fledgling doppelganger still ended up causing a commotion. It didn't like this development one bit, as it had intended to prey on targets that society wouldn't miss. Surely notorious criminals fit that bill, right? However, that was clearly not the case, and now it had a reputation it didn't want. Rumor that a merciless vigilante was hunting criminal elements was sure to cause said elements to go into hiding, or step up their security, which in turn would make Boxxy's search for dinner all the more difficult.

At the very least, the city of Azurvale didn't seem to have a clue as to the Sandman's real identity. Reports and hearsay on the topic described it in

vague terms like ‘ominous figure’ or ‘crazy bastard,’ hinting that the shapeshifter had not *accidentally* let a witness get away. That said, it wasn’t liking this attention one bit. Boxxy briefly considered lying low for a while, but the damage was already done. Besides, Xera had pointed out that this Sandman persona might be useful later on, so there was no real reason for the monster to change its hunting habits. Which was why it was currently in an underground tunnel, looking to make lunch out of yet more undesirables.

It was eager to finish things down there and get back to blending in with the other adventurers, so it momentarily undid its chesty transformation. Once it was back to being the size of a pre-teen, it crawled through the opening in the rubble that Kora had made earlier. It then used the Transfamiliar Spell as quietly as possible to transport the oversized fiend on the other size of the blockage. It could’ve simply widened the hole, but doing so would raise too much noise, not to mention it might collapse the old passage further. Boxxy crawled through the hole a second time and assumed its preferred shape once more.

Now that both of them were through, they started walking through the abandoned waterways. The stone-brick passage they found themselves in was only about two meters tall, so Kora had to move forward while crouching and keeping her head down, lest her horns scrape against the low ceiling. Her posture was uncomfortable and awkward, but at the very least this part of the tunnel system didn’t have any stagnant water or old moss stinking it up, so there was that.

The two of them steadily made their way along the straight tunnel, towards the flickering torchlight. They arrived at a small T-shaped junction, with the passage splitting left and right. Boxxy commanded Kora to stay put, activated its Stealth Skill, and peered around the right corner—the one the light was coming from. The passage fed into a large cylindrical chamber that appeared to have people in it. It couldn’t quite see them, but it definitely heard multiple voices.

The almost-mimic colored its chest-shaped shell a dark gray to match its surroundings and crept steadily forward, making sure to remain on high alert. Once the spider-chest reached the end of the tunnel, it pressed itself against the right side of it and took a good look around. The chamber

appeared to be some sort of old cistern or water reservoir, as it was at least thirty meters in diameter and had a height of about seven meters, although any water that was once here had long ago dried up. Several columns of light shone down from round holes in the ceiling—likely old wells that had been sealed up by metal grates. However, the things that provided most of the visibility down here were numerous torches lining the far edge of the room, placed around the stone columns holding up the ceiling.

In that light stood a group of nine elves. Five of them were huddled around a small bonfire with a metal pot on it, preparing what appeared to be some type of soup. The other three rested on makeshift bedding. The final one was off to the side with his back turned towards the rest and was taking a leak. Judging from their ragged clothing and overall depressing atmosphere, not to mention the torn-up tents that barely provided any shelter, these people seemed to be nothing more than hobos that had taken shelter here. Upon closer inspection, the shapeshifter spotted a frayed rope ladder dangling from one of the well openings overhead, likely their way in and out of the place.

Boxxy then suddenly had an epiphany. Thinking back on its brief stay in Erosa, the monster realized it had killed a large number of bums, and attracted zero attention. Which meant those people were the ones society wouldn't miss. The poor, destitute and homeless existed in every major city, and were largely ignored by higher-class citizens, so nobody of importance would care if they disappeared. If it had just preyed on these guys rather than going after notorious criminals, then that questionable Sandman rumor would never have started in the first place!

Well, it didn't really regret doing that. Attacking those criminals provided the monster with a sizable chunk of XP and they were quite delicious in their own right. These bums, on the other hand, were barely even people as their bodies were skinny, disease-ridden sacks of stringy flesh. The most Boxxy could do with their corpses was use them as fodder for its Cadaver Absorption Proficiency, though a success would likely yield very little. Right now, it would probably just devour them. Even if they weren't particularly tasty or filling, they were still very much edible. Not to mention

that they would serve as a good source of proficiency for its newly acquired Demonic Insight Skill.

Boxxy went out of the tunnel it was hiding in and stealthily climbed the walls. It then crawled along the ceiling, making sure to stick behind the supporting pillars whenever possible so as to hide its body from view. Once it got close enough, it started chanting the Spell it got at Level 1 of Demonic Insight. Being under the effects of Stealth allowed the monster's Arcane Assassin Perk to kick in. It muffled the sound of its voice, allowing it to cast the Spell in total silence, albeit at an increased MP cost.

The monster finished invoking its Spell a few seconds later with a silent utterance of 'Implosion!'

PAKINNN

There was a flash of blinding green light accompanied by a high-pitched wail that sent all nine of the homeless elves into a panic. The inexplicable phenomenon had occurred directly over their little bonfire, so those sitting around it were losing their shit at a rapid pace. They managed to calm themselves down for a moment when they realized they weren't actually injured, but that relief disappeared just as quickly as it had arrived.

"Waaaakwakawaka!"

"Kuweekakaka!"

"Arrrkaaakaraaaa!"

A large number of high-pitched, squawking voices filled the chamber, as the elves found themselves surrounded by nearly thirty squirrel-sized monsters. The tiny creatures resembled miniature satyr due to their humanoid upper halves and furry, goat-like lower bodies. Their bodies and their fur came in all manner of colors, although most of them were either a dull yellow, or a dark red. Their pointy horns, long noses and ears, and thin, rodent-like tails poking out of their backsides gave them a strangely comical appearance.

They were imps, the demonic equivalent of rats. These otherworldly vermin barely had any self-awareness or strength of their own, which made them wildly unpredictable. They cackled and pranced about randomly, as the elves were too shocked by this sudden turn of events to even scream. For

the briefest moment, it seemed like these strange creatures would just go away as long as they stood perfectly still. But that wouldn't last.

All it took was for one of the elves to inhale a bit too sharply, and every last one of those tiny demons flew into a frenzy. Some of them started clawing and biting at the unfortunate bums, while others bombarded them with tiny bursts of flame. However, almost all of their 'attacks' did practically zero damage. Their tiny hands and short teeth could barely even draw blood, while the puny magical power behind their fiery projectiles would at most singe the filthy rags these homeless elves draped themselves in. Their assault was painful and annoying, but by no means lethal.

It didn't take long for the bums to fight back by kicking them around, stomping them underfoot or smashing them with whatever cookery, wooden canes, or loose bricks were at hand. They had no idea what was going on, but they weren't about to just roll over and die. Not that there was any chance of that happening, though. Imps were so pathetically weak, that they probably wouldn't even beat a nine-year-old unless six or seven of them ganged up on the child. So, this situation where thirty of them challenged nine fully-grown adults was a foregone conclusion.

However, Boxxy wasn't done quite yet.

PAKINNN

Another loud bang and blinding flash flooded the room as the shapeshifter used the misleadingly named Implosion Spell yet again. Another swarm of the demonic vermin popped out from the rift that momentarily opened to the Beyond, bringing the total number of imps up to about fifty. The new arrivals happily joined the fray as the homeless elves kept trying to fight them off.

PAKINNN

Yet another gaggle of imps appeared from nowhere, but they still wouldn't be enough to actually defeat the elves. Not that their summoner really cared about who won this scrap. Boxxy's goal was to train its Demonic Insight Skill, so having those people struggle against the effects of its Implosion Spell was exactly what it wanted. The aforementioned Skill's Proficiency would steadily go up just so long as the imps it summoned had someone or

something to play with. It would keep using the Spell as many times as its MP would allow, which wasn't a lot considering it consumed 10% of its maximum MP, even without it having to pay an extra 25% of that in order to cast it silently.

This oddity struck the monster as strange at first. Typically speaking, Spells appeared to have a fixed cost and would increase in power with the related Mastery Skill, the INT Attribute and any magical amplification gained from items. However, these demonic Spells worked by their own rules, and did not seem to actually have a related Mastery Skill. In fact, they weren't even recognized as an official school of magic like Ruin or Domination seeing as the monster's Spell List had categorized them as 'Other.'

PAKINNN

But the shapeshifter had quickly realized that this was simply how Beyond-related magic worked. Looking at the Summon Familiar Skill or the Offering rituals, it was obvious that the strength of the magical effect was directly proportional to the amount of mana used to invoke it. In the case of the former, a higher amount of spent MP would result in a stronger familiar. For the latter, it wouldn't affect the power that the summoned Overlord could exhibit, but supplying the demonic big-shot with more mana would allow them to maintain their physical form for longer. As for the Implosion Spell, it would increase the number of imps called forth from the Beyond at a rate of eight to twelve imps for every 100 MP spent.

PAKINNN

However, unlike the ritual or the Skill, Boxxy could repeat this Spell as many times as it wanted, which was precisely what it did. It was actually starting to enjoy watching the spontaneous hobo-imp war. The noise even attracted several homeless people from neighboring tunnels to act as reinforcements. There was just so much going on that it was impossible to keep track of everything and made for a surprisingly entertaining show. In fact, the number of imps grew so much that the idiotic creatures started fighting one another because the crowd around the elves was too dense.

As for those unfortunate bums, it appeared they were already at their limits. Their bodies were covered in scratches, bite marks and burns, their feeble

stamina was quickly running out and their faces were gripped by despair. Even if the opposing side's 'soldiers' were pitifully weak by comparison, the elves had no chance of winning against what appeared to be a never-ending stream of enemies. Something that Boxxy had every intention to prove.

PAKINNN

[Chaotic energies swirl around you.]
[You will be teleported in a random direction within the next 5 seconds.]

However, it would seem that the Chaotic Disposition Skill was about to interfere. Boxxy didn't even have time to react as its chesty body suddenly vanished with a flash of blue light and reappeared some fifteen meters from its original location with another flash. The monster had relocated to a spot in the middle of the chamber directly above the cacophony of bum-on-imp combat. Having nothing to grab on to, it fell right in the middle of the melee with a loud thud, crushing a few of the imps underchest. The paupers naturally did not fail to notice the spider-legged box that appeared out of thin air, nor were the imps completely impartial to this newcomer.

The monster calmly picked itself up off the ground and sighed internally. It had gotten perhaps a bit carried away, as it suddenly remembered it had places to be and things to do. Deciding not to waste any more time, it sprouted four long whip-like tentacles covered in tiny blades. It then spun around in place like a horrific weed whacker, severing the lives of demons and elves alike while bathing the chamber in their blood. It waited for half a minute for the demonic corpses and their bodily fluids to disappear into thin air before it quickly chowed down on the mutilated homeless.

Once it was done, it sent a telepathic communication to Xera.

"Snack, I'm done here. How are things on your end?"

"All good, Master. I think your, uh, 'colleagues' are starting to notice your absence, though."

"Okay, then prepare for another transfer."

"Understood, just let me find a good spot that's hidden from view."

“Arms, the chamber is clear, come here and resume the search with Snack once she returns.”

“You got it, boss.”

Boxxy let out another sigh. It really wanted to stay in its chesty form a while longer, but it wasn’t something it could afford to do just yet. It had recently obtained a new Job, and it wanted to avoid learning things the hard way like it did with its Warlock Job. Thankfully, most of the adventurer guilds in this city provided excellent training courses for aspiring adventurers, so at least it wouldn’t have to look for a teacher. It didn’t have much trouble blending in either, although it struggled to contain its appetite around the other students.

Especially around that one positively *delicious*-looking apprentice in Faehorn’s class.

Part Three

“Man, I am beat!” Keira complained, sweat running down her face.

“Are you alright, Red?”

The female elf next to her asked more out of courtesy than concern. She was a young woman around Keira’s age, her leaf-green hair tied in a practical ponytail. She wore a set of chainmail equipment identical to the beastkin’s, which was standard-issue gear among Ranger trainees of the Hidden Arrow guild.

“I’ll be fine, Lia. Just gotta… rest a bit…”

“Hmm, if you say so.”

The two of them were riding a cart on their way back from a training session. Today’s hunting expedition had turned out to be much harsher than Keira expected, so it was only natural that she was dead tired. Though, it wasn’t because the ten-man class’s targets were particularly challenging. Those sheep-sized termites that ate away at the elves’ hylt tree farm to the south of the city were simple enough to deal with. Their shells weren’t particularly tough and they lacked any form of ranged attack, so a small team of Rangers could easily take down a large number of the giant bugs.

In fact, trainees like Keira were often dispatched to act as pest control since fighting those things allowed them to safely and steadily acquire Levels and Skill Proficiency. Well, provided they steered clear of the actual nest, as that particular threat required copious amounts of fire-based magic to safely clear out. What these fledgling archers had to do was merely cull the termite population to make it easier to manage and contain their spread.

“So, how many did you get today?” asked Lia.

“I got twenty. You?”

“Twenty-three. Looks like you’ll have to try better next time.”

“Just you wait, I’ll get better and definitely beat you!” Keira stated confidently.

“I don’t plan on letting you just catch up to me though,” the elf smirked.

The two's scores for the day were rather impressive, as most trainees only managed to bring down about a dozen termites on average in that time. Those pests loved to climb up the sides of the forty-to-sixty-meter-tall hylt saplings and nibble on the bark and branches, so hunting them often involved dealing with the numerous limbs and leaves that got in the way.

This was typically accomplished either by climbing up the side of the tree in order to get a clean shot or relying on pure marksmanship to take them down from the ground. Keira had gone for the first approach while Lia opted for the latter. Both of them performed exceptionally well for their Level, but neither could hope to match the guy who came in first today. And every day.

"… I just wish that Miller guy wouldn't show off so much," said Lia while glaring at the plain-looking male elf riding the cart in front of theirs. "I mean I appreciate a little rivalry, but he just makes me feel inadequate."

"Why? How many did he get?"

"Thirty. Seven."

"Wow. Okay."

"It's not just the body count either," the female elf continued. "The way he runs up those trees and that scary accuracy of his both make me wonder if he's really in the Level 10 to 15 bracket …"

"He's not."

A sudden male voice from the side made both girls jump a little in surprise. A grizzled, old elf with slicked-back brown hair and most of his left ear missing walked alongside the cart. A thick, rune-inscribed longbow was slung across his torso and bouncing off fancy, silver-scale armor.

"Ah! In-instructor Faehorn!" Lia exclaimed. "Wh-what do you mean?"

"His Ranger Level is significantly higher than yours," explained the old elf, "but his actual skill level is atrocious."

"A power-leveler, huh?"

"You are correct, miss Torlee," he nodded to Lia. "If he had the same Attributes as you two, he'd struggle to get even half as many as he did."

“Hmm, so that’s why he seems to have it so easy.”

“Indeed. Well, he’s properly absorbing my teachings and isn’t as overconfident as most power-levelers, so I’m sure I can fix him right up before the end of the course.”

“Uhm, wh-what’s a power-leveler?” Keira asked sheepishly. “I’ve heard about it before, but…”

“It’s what we call people who get their Job Level artificially raised,” said the instructor. “Attacking a high-Leveled monster and then having someone else finish it off in order to gain easy XP is a fast way to raise Job Levels, but I disapprove of that approach since those people never learn to apply themselves properly.”

Faehorn tried to instill two main lessons in all his students— ‘Don’t mistake Status for ability’ and ‘power without direction is meaningless.’ While developing one’s Attributes, Skills and Jobs would make them more powerful, being able to properly utilize that power was what made the difference between a good adventurer and a great one.

“There are some things you won’t learn from just gaining a bunch of Levels,” continued Faehorn. “Punctuality, for example. Isn’t that right, Miss *Morgana*.”

Having her last name called out so suddenly made Keira freeze in place with a stiff smile. Being subjected to the instructor’s piercing gaze didn’t help matters, either.

“C-come on, mister Faehorn,” she pleaded. “I already did a twenty-kilometer run this morning, didn’t I?”

That was her punishment for being late earlier today, and also the main reason she looked like she was about to pass out. The instructor purposefully kept pushing her for the remainder of the day, not willing to give her exhausted body the chance to fully recover. There was a good chance the catgirl might not have made it back to the city if she wasn’t allowed to ride the supply cart. Faehorn wanted to make her walk the whole way, but he also promised that she could rest on the way back if she made it

in the top three. Which, surprisingly, she had. It was amazing how motivated she became at the prospect of being able to laze about.

“You did, though I think another fifty or so kilometers are in order,” he said sternly. “Guess you can do them tomorrow.”

“S-surely that’s too much just for being a bit late,” she pleaded with him.

“This is unrelated to you being tardy.”

“It… it is?”

“I’ve been thinking about this for a while. You get tired way too easily. Your need to learn to pace yourself better.”

“Uhm, teacher?” spoke up Lia. “I don’t think it’s a matter of pacing. Don’t all beastkin get tired easily?”

The young elf had a point. Compared to elves, beastkin tended to be faster, more agile and had slightly sharper senses, but their stamina was atrocious. An elf Ranger of Keira’s Level would normally be able to run those twenty kilometers without so much as breaking a sweat, and yet she was a total wreck from just that.

“Hmm, you may have a point,” said Faehorn, much to the two girls’ surprise. “We don’t get many of her kind around these parts, so I didn’t take that into account. It was my fault as a teacher, for which I apologize.”

“It-it’s okay, mister Faehorn!” Keira insisted, her cheeks red from embarrassment. “You really don’t need to worry.”

“No, no, I really need to consider your race when thinking up your training menu.”

The grizzled Ranger cupped his chin in thought as he sped up to check on the slow-moving cart up ahead.

“Perhaps a twenty-kilometer run every morning and evening to help build stamina…” he mumbled as he speed-walked away.

“Lia! Don’t say unnecessary things!”

The redhead stared at her colleague as if she had just condemned her to a life in prison, making the guilty elf avert her gaze.

“W-well, he does have a point,” she offered weakly. “Being a Ranger is a taxing Job so having more endurance is hardly a bad thing.”

“I’ll die! I’ll seriously die if I have to run that much each day!” the catgirl complained.

“Hm? Hey, Keira, not for nothing, but I think that guy is staring at you again.”

Lia’s rather clumsy attempt at changing the subject seemed to work, as the catgirl’s accusatory stare was redirected to follow the elf’s line of sight. Looking forward, she noticed that the supposedly high-Leveled elf they were talking about earlier was staring at her over his shoulder. Their eyes met for a brief moment, then he turned his gaze back forward.

“That boy, I bet he has a crush on you,” Lia teased her. “He’s been sneaking glances for a while now.”

“Huh? But we’ve barely even spoken.”

“Maybe, but you’re pretty and energetic. And surprisingly adorable when you get flustered.”

“Oh… Uh, when you put it like that, I guess you have a point…”

The catgirl calmed down, her cheeks slightly browning from embarrassment.

“So? Aren’t you going to talk to him?” Lia urged.

“Why would I?”

“Shouldn’t you go talk to him, maybe give him a chance?”

“No, I don’t think I should.”

“Oh, come on, live a little. His face isn’t half bad, and Mister Faehorn made him sound like a responsible guy.”

“He’s not my type, okay?” Keira snapped, sounding annoyed. “Besides, I already have someone.”

“Wait, what? You’re already in a relationship?!”

The catgirl's pouting face lit up with a brilliant smile comparable to a sunrise.

"I am indeed!"

"How!? Why?! When!? I mean, you only got here a week ago, right?!"

"What can I say? When you meet that special someone, you just know right away."

The dreamy look in Keira's eyes made it abundantly clear she wasn't just saying that—she believed it.

"Details! Give me details!" Lia insisted, hungry for gossip.

"W-well, it's not that big a deal. I mean, I was just looking for a cheap place to stay when I arrived here, but didn't have a lot of luck finding one. It was getting late so I went into this restaurant for dinner. It was crowded and noisy, and I noticed this guy at the bar in some fancy clothes."

Lia swallowed audibly as she clung onto every word.

"Then he slapped my butt, so I clawed him across the arm."

"… Huh?"

"Oh yeah. He must have gotten some mixed signals or something and groped my butt when I walked past, so I reflexively slashed at him. It was a shame too. He got blood all over my clothes. Then a guard came in and he got super angry."

"Of course, he did! I mean, I guess the guy sort of deserved it, but attacking him with *those* things seems overboard!"

Lia had seen the retractable claws hidden in Keira's otherwise normal-looking toes and fingertips. One really wouldn't know they were there unless she brought them out. They looked rather small and unthreatening at first glance, but the elf knew better. She had seen firsthand just how sharp and tough they really were when Keira used them to scale those hylt saplings with absolutely no difficulty. That's how she was able to get third place in today's hunting expedition despite being dead-tired the whole time.

"… My butt is really sensitive," the beastkin blushed.

“That’s not the point! You can’t just assault people like that!”

“Anyway, the guy raised a huge fuss over that tiny scratch.”

Keira continued her story while completely ignoring Lia’s protests. She explained how she nearly got jailed because the guy kept saying she attacked him unprovoked. Then Rowana showed up and managed to talk him into sparing everyone a bunch of headaches and letting both parties go. She then invited Keira back into the restaurant, offering to buy her dinner to apologize on behalf of her fellow elf.

“It was the nicest thing anyone’s done for me in a long time,” the redhead said with tears welling up in her eyes. “Then we started talking and one thing led to another and we ended up living together.”

There was a brief moment of silence as Keira stood there with a light smile while hugging her knees.

“… So?” asked Lia after the brief pause.

“So… what?”

“Is that all there is to the story?”

“Pretty much.”

“But, weren’t you going to tell me how you met your lover?”

“I just did, didn’t I?”

“But you didn’t mention a boyfriend or… anything… like… Oh.”

Lia’s words trailed off as realization washed over her like a cold shower.

“What’s wrong, Lia?” Keira asked, looking confused.

“Ah, sorry! I was just a bit surprised… I mean, your face and voice are just so feminine that I just assumed you were a girl. That was bad of me.”

“I *am* a girl,” the redhead said sternly.

“… You are?”

“What’s with that dubious expression? I’m most definitely a girl. I mean, I know my chest is a bit small, but I have room to grow. Here, I’ll prove it to you!”

Keira's hands grabbed the edge of her chainmail tunic and started rolling it up.

"Okay, okay! I believe you, so please stop stripping!"

Lia waved her hands around in a fluster, somehow managing to calm down the ticked-off catgirl. If she denied it to that extent, then it was obvious the elf misunderstood the nature of the misunderstanding. That did, however, raise another question.

"So, you, uh, are in a relationship with another girl?" she asked after another awkward pause.

"Yup! Rowie's the best girlfriend I could ever ask for!"

Keira's previous dissatisfaction disappeared in an instant when the topic of her special someone came up. Her wide smile and sparkling eyes made it seem like her angry fit was an illusion.

"And you said you two… live together?"

"Ehehehe… It's kind of embarrassing when someone else says it…"

The petite catgirl hid her blushing cheeks with her palms while shaking her head lightly, although her goofy grin did not diminish in the slightest. It was without a doubt the image of a maiden in love.

Wait, was she actually still a 'maiden?'

"Th-then… have you two… done it?" asked Lia, unable to contain her curiosity.

Keira's tanned skin flushed with an even darker shade of red at the slightly inappropriate question. She didn't deny it, but couldn't bring herself to admit it either. Which was more or less the same as screaming "YES, WE'VE HAD SEX!" with all her might.

"Wow… So this little girl has already become a woman, huh?"

"Lia!"

"Ahaha, sorry, sorry! I was just a little surprised, I didn't mean anything by it."

The elf let out an embarrassed chuckle and apology while trying to calm down the hyperactive beastkin she was riding with. However, both her face and tone turned rather serious a few seconds later.

“Look, Keira, I appreciate you sharing this with me, but you might want to avoid telling too many people about that relationship of yours.”

“Huh? What are you talking about?”

“Just please, hear me out. I don’t know how things were back where you grew up, but Azurvale is hardly the best place for… those like you. While a lot of people don’t really care, there are quite a few fanatics that think same-sex couples should be outlawed. You probably had no idea about any of this, right?”

Keira shook her head with a troubled expression.

“As I thought… Look, you have to understand it’s a religious thing. The vast majority of elves worship Nyrie, the Goddess of Nature and Fertility. Her realm mostly has to do with crops and livestock, but it also technically includes, uh, **Cough** baby making.”

“So what? She hates people who don’t make kids?”

“No, she doesn’t. At least, I don’t believe she does. There are those who say otherwise, however. There’s a certain… movement that claims couples that can’t bear children are heretical and should be prohibited. Or worse. And while such a stupid law is unlikely to become reality, it doesn’t stop them from doing terrible things to innocent people.”

Keira had no idea how to respond. She had absolutely no idea this was the case, but it made sense now that she thought about her various interactions ever since she came to this city.

“My point is,” Lia continued, “you might be targeted if word got out.”

“But… why didn’t Rowie mention any of this?”

“She was probably scared to tell you since it’s a difficult subject for her. Besides, you probably have a few secrets of your own, right?”

“Yeah… I see… Thanks a lot for telling me this, Lia.”

“Don’t mention it. All I ask is that you don’t let that vocal minority warp your perception of us elves. We got a bad enough reputation out there as it is.”

“I won’t,” Keira forced a smile. “After all, you don’t seem to mind.”

“Yeah, well, I personally think those people are just full of shit,” the elf scowled. “Those fanatics are all dirty old men, you know. Just pigs who want women to serve as baby factories and nothing else.”

“Do elves struggle with having kids that much? I mean there are a lot more humans than elves around so-”

“That is most certainly not the case. We’re not any less fertile than humans or dwarves, you know! It’s just that we’re more in control of our lower halves!”

“Really? That’s not the impression I got from Rowie…”

“Keira.”

“What?”

“Too much information.”

Part Four

The door to Rowana's humble abode swung open, and Keira walked through it with her usual, carefree grin.

"Honey, I'm home!" she called out in a cheerful voice.

"You don't need to shout so loud, Keira!" the elf protested from her seat at the desk. "I'm right here, you know!"

"Oh, come on! Is that any way to greet me?"

"… Haah," the elf sighed, then put on a tired smile. "Welcome back, sweetie."

Those three simple words were all Keira wanted to hear. She nodded with a satisfied expression and closed the door behind her, then walked up to Rowana.

"More paperwork?" she asked, pointing at a small stack.

"Yeah. Apparently, there was an outbreak of Snake Eye at a nearby restaurant, so we got swamped with patients suffering from tunnel vision. It really strained our supplies at the clinic, so I'm writing up requisition orders."

The nineteen-year old elf was an Alchemist who worked as an apothecary and physician. Open wounds and fractured bones could easily be patched up with healing magic, but persistent problems such as rashes, diseases and toothaches were best dealt with by applying the right poultice or elixir. Her wages were a bit low since she was technically still an apprentice, but it was nevertheless a steady job that involved helping people, which was everything Rowana wanted. She could do with less paperwork, but that was inevitable with government jobs.

"Hmm… sounds rough," Keira commented.

"Not as rough as you've had it, apparently. You positively reek of sweat."

"Ugh… don't remind me… I'm gonna go wash up."

“Okay,” the elf said while stretching her stiff back. “I’ll get dinner ready while you do that.”

“Steamed salmon, right?!”

“Yup. I got a good deal for it at the market earlier. It’s super fresh, too.”

“Alright!”

The catgirl bounced off towards the rear of the house and went down a narrow staircase into the cellar. She quickly took off her gear, threw it into a pile in the corner and went into the small bathroom. It was literally carved into the magical hylt tree’s bark, much like the rest of the cellar. A small magic lamp dangled from the ceiling to provide ample light while Keira filled the wooden tub with hot water and started washing herself off. Being able to leisurely take a bath in one’s own home, even one as small as this, was a luxury that only those living in the capital could enjoy. The handmade scented soaps and shampoos, on the other hand, were some of the perks of living with an Alchemist.

Keira emerged from the cellar twenty minutes later wearing a plain tunic and trousers, courtesy of Rowana. She found that, much to her delight, a plate of piping hot, bright-red steamed salmon fillets was waiting for her. The elf set out another serving for herself and the two sat down to eat and chat about their days.

“-but then he slipped on some bird poop and fell of the branch!”

Or at least, that’s what the elf intended, but Keira’s way of explaining things turned every meal into a surprisingly boisterous one. The lively gesturing, random arm flailing and excited tail wagging that accompanied her tales were completely devoid of manners or coherence.

“Oh my. I hope the poor lad didn’t hurt himself.”

Rowana quite enjoyed that unrestrained side of her, though. The beastkin girl’s hyperactive, overtly-animated explanations were quite endearing, not to mention entertaining.

“I thought he was gonna get injured too,” continued Keira, “but mister Faehorn managed to save him with an amazing Power Shot! I didn’t even see the arrow in flight!”

She had the power to make even the dullest, most mundane event seem much more exciting than it actually was.

“One moment it was on his bow and the next thing I knew it had already pierced Jeremy’s collar and had pinned him to the side of the tree!”

“Oh, he’s a good guy after all, isn’t he?”

“I told you he was.”

The catgirl finished her story and ate the piece of salmon that had been on her fork for the past few minutes. The way she waved it around sent juices flying everywhere. Even if it was messy and noisy, Rowana much preferred this lively atmosphere rather than the lonely, depressing evenings she had gotten used to.

“Soo gooood!”

Keira let out a few squeals of delight as she happily chewed on the delicious fish, then swallowed it with an audible gulp. She then put another piece of meat into her mouth and resumed.

“So anyway, that’s when the instructor decided to call it quits for the day, since everyone was starting to lose focus. He even let me ride the cart on the way back since I did a good job today! And then- Ah…”

The catgirl suddenly stopped speaking and cast her eyes downward.

“Keira? What’s wrong?”

There was a short pause before Keira swallowed her mouthful, then brought up the issue that she had been made aware of earlier that afternoon.

“I wish you would have told me about the Nyrie thing.”

“… You found out about that after all,” Rowana said glumly.

“So it’s true? There are selfish people out there that wouldn’t approve of our relationship?”

“I’m afraid so.”

The elf cast her eyes downward and took a deep sigh.

“I’m sorry, I know I should have told you right away, but you’re just so cheerful and easygoing that I… I was afraid I might scare you off so I couldn’t bring myself to tell you…”

Rowana had wanted to tell her about this the moment they confirmed they had feelings for each other, but the words got stuck in her throat like a lump. She just couldn’t bring herself to bring that heavy topic up.

“Then the real reason you don’t want to go out on dates or even hold hands in public is because of that?”

“Y-yes…”

Of course she understood this was a terrible, selfish decision, but part of her just wanted to pretend her homophobic countrymen didn’t exist. Not to mention she had no idea how that hyperactive girl might react.

“Oh thank goodness!” exclaimed Keira.

“… What?”

Okay, she may have had *some* ideas about her reaction, but a relieved ‘thank goodness’ was definitely not among them.

“I thought maybe you were ashamed of being seen with me or something like that, so that’s why you kept making excuses.”

“Th-that’s definitely not it! I’d love nothing more than to show the world how much you mean to me! It’s just that… that…”

“-you’re worried about someone tearing us apart by force.”

“Yeah,” the elf sighed after a short pause.

Being harassed by strangers was one thing, but Rowana’s parents were a much bigger obstacle. The Slyth household had always been bogged down by tradition, so there was no chance that her mother and father would approve of the relationship. She hadn’t even told them of her orientation, for fear of what they might do. It was also why she insisted she move out and learn to live independently at such a young age, as if distancing herself from the issue would somehow make it go away. Things obviously hadn’t worked out that way.

“I see, I see,” the catgirl crossed her arms with a serious look on her face. “Then I must take some rather extreme measures.”

“Extreme measures?” Rowana raised an eyebrow.

“That’s right. Don’t you worry one bit, for I have come up with a brilliant, foolproof plan to fix this!”

“Ahah. You did, did you?”

The catgirl’s relentlessly cheerful attitude was steadily infecting Rowana, drawing out both a smile and a chuckle.

“I’ll just become the best damned adventurer there ever was!”

“… And how does that fix anything?”

“If I become famous and strong enough, then nobody would dare get in our way! Anyone stupid enough to try to ruin our relationship would be sent running for the hills with just a glare from yours truly!”

It was outlandish, childish and unrealistic reasoning, but the sheer conviction with which she said it almost made Rowana believe. Of course, even if the outrageous ‘best damned adventurer’ title was a thing that existed, she doubted it would be enough to overcome centuries’ worth of culture and tradition. Admittedly, the elves’ homophobia was nowhere near as bad as it used to be during the time of the Elven Dominion, but the Ishigar Republic that rose up to replace it had a ways to go yet.

“And if anyone even dares to lay a finger on you, then I’ll send them flying with a single hit!”

“My, my, is that so?”

However, rather than rain on her parade, Rowana just happily accepted Keira’s feelings.

“It is. And then we can be lovey-dovey all we want, wherever we want.”

“Is the current level of lovey-dovey not enough for you?”

Rowana leaned in closer to Keira as she spoke in a sultry voice. Their faces were so close to each other that their noses almost touched.

“I mean, w-well,” the suddenly flustered catgirl stammered. She reflexively leaned back a bit as her eyes darted all over the place. “It’s just that I-Mmmmpf?!”

The elf suddenly threw her arms around Keira’s neck and sealed those thin, chocolatey lips with her own. The beastkin’s eyes widened in surprise for a brief moment before she eagerly returned both the embrace and the kiss. Both of them moaned quietly as their tongues entwined around each other. Rowana pulled her face away from her lover’s after about a minute, licking and smacking her lips as she did so.

“Lovey-dovey enough for you?” she whispered.

“C-could use a little more…”

“Mmmhm. Then shall we move onto the main event?”

The two of them got up from the table and made their way towards the bed while kissing and caressing each other, whereupon Rowana thoroughly worshipped the smaller girl’s body.

What Lia had said earlier that day regarding her people’s biology was no lie. The knife-eared elves had no trouble conceiving children, it was just that their libido and desire to have offspring were quite subdued. Rowana had been like that as well, regardless of her sexual preference. She of course felt attracted to beautiful women, but never outright lusted after them. She also knew that her people’s naturally weak sex drive was often a strain on cross-species couples. She was worried it would negatively affect her own relationship with the more primal beastkin girl.

However, such fears were almost immediately shattered, as there was something about Keira that sent Rowana’s passions ablaze like nothing else could. Although the elf didn’t want to openly admit it, the most likely cause for this was her own nose. Her sense of smell had always been strangely acute, which was vital for an Alchemist since the fumes of a potion-in-progress often gave clues as to how well the brewing process was going. The elf’s sharp sense of smell was then further amplified by her Perception (PER) Attribute as she gained Job and Skill Levels, and currently rivaled that of high-Leveled Rangers. It also had the side-effect of making her thoroughly aware of Keira’s scent when they first met.

And she smelled *good*.

It wasn't as if Rowana had a vulgar habit of sniffing others, though. It was just that the animalistic musk of the young catgirl drifted into her nostrils all on its own. It was completely unlike anyone or anything else she had ever smelled before, and it had the curious effect of waking up the elf's wild side. Tonight was no different. In fact, the elf had been 'in the mood' pretty much ever since her lover came back stinking of sweat, and had planned on 'devouring' her girlfriend throughout their entire dinner.

She wasn't sure whether this strangely arousing scent was due to some trait of the beastkin species, or whether she might secretly be a pervert, or perhaps even a bit of both, but none of that mattered to her at this point. The only thing that did, was that this phenomenon allowed her and her lover to share their joy in carnal bliss with enviable frequency. Their compatibility was so good that the elf almost felt like they were made for each other. It was as if their meeting a little over a week ago was fate. Although others might call this a naive or childish notion, those people could go suck on a lemon for all she cared.

While the two lovebirds steadily worked on staining Rowana's bed sheets for the umpteenth time, another pair of women were also getting busy in their own way. Namely Xera and Kora, who at the time were roughly two hundred meters below the young couple's love nest. They were still busy searching the old decrepit sewers under Azurvale for a good spot to establish their Master's lair, and had just made an interesting discovery.

"Master, we've found a group of R.O.U.S. down here," reported the succubus.

This section of the underground maze was much more spacious that the rest of it, much to Kora's relief. It was shaped like an upside-down half-pipe that was nearly as wide as a street. The middle of it had a shallow trench running through and was probably once filled with water. Right now, however, it was bone dry.

"What's an Arr Oh You Ess?" her ignorant master replied. "Doesn't sound very tasty."

“Not particularly tasty, no,” the succubus confirmed without skipping a beat. “They’re basically horse-sized rats or mice. I think one of them’s a chipmunk, actually.”

“So, monsters?”

“Indeed, Master.”

“Nice.”

It was an unwritten law of this world that a high enough concentration of ambient magical energy would, in time, give birth to the aberrant creatures called monsters. The excess mana would either mutate existing, normally harmless animals, draw in magical beings from afar or bring inanimate objects and substances to life. Regardless of the method, the end result was always the appearance of monsters. The large termites that plagued the surrounding hylt trees were perfect examples of this phenomenon.

In other words, the presence of these Rodents of Unusual Size was a sure sign that the area around this section of the tunnel was likely dense in ambient mana. Just the sort of thing that Xera and Kora were looking for down here, and also the likely reason why these tunnels were shut down in the first place. A monster infestation took decades, maybe even centuries to set in, but was near impossible to completely clear out after that point. The government had likely decided to cut their losses and seal off the vermin while taking the opportunity to renovate the city’s plumbing infrastructure.

“How’s the mana density?” Boxxy asked.

“… I can’t sense it.”

Xera was both a demon and a Pyromancer, which made her naturally sensitive to the intangible and normally invisible substance known as mana. However, she lacked her Master’s perceptiveness in that regard, so she couldn’t pick up on magical signatures that were too faint. Which also meant that the mana around this place was not thick enough to serve as nourishment for the shapeshifter’s dungeon core.

“I see. Keep searching and find the source,” Boxxy commanded.

“Understood, Master.”

“So, we’re going in deeper, right?” Kora asked while scraping rat blood off the soles of her boots.

The six R.O.U.S. were a total joke in terms of actual strength and would completely splatter with just the lightest kick. It wasn’t enough to sate her thirst for violence, so she was eagerly looking forward to smashing more of the filthy vermin.

“That’s right,” confirmed Xera. “Let’s check out the direction these things came from.”

The dynamic, demonic duo kept advancing through the ruined tunnels, and clearing out the odd pack of R.O.U.S. They couldn’t tell if the mana density in the air was getting weaker or stronger, so they mostly just looked for large concentrations of the overgrown rodents. It took them a few hours, but they eventually made another promising discovery. The tunnel they were in was sealed off completely due to a wall of mossy bark.

“Master,” Xera reached out telepathically, “I think we’ve found the source of the monsters down here. There’s a gigantic tree root poking through the side of the tunnel, and it has a huge hole in the side of it that’s leaking a good amount mana from inside.”

“Inside?”

“Yes, Master. It’s hollowed out and there seems to be a tunnel leading up into the tree’s interior.”

Boxxy quickly thought back to all the things it had learned from the elves during its stay in the city, especially concerning those trees’ unique biology. It was highly likely that this hole and tunnel were made by a termite colony. If a nest was nearby, then this would be a huge chance for it to obtain the lair it wanted. Well, the place still had to be scouted out, as it wasn’t completely sure whether this was actually the case.

“How wide is the hole?”

The succubus looked at the narrow opening that was barely a meter in diameter. The circular wooden tunnel inside wasn’t much wider.

“Big enough for me or you to squeeze through, but the meat-head will probably get stuck.”

“Go in and investigate it, let me know if you find a termite nest. Arms will stand by outside the entrance in case I need to use Transfamiliar.”

“Haah. Understood, Master.”

Xera sighed in dissatisfaction as she climbed into the tight passage, while Kora grumbled at the fact she was being made to stand around doing nothing again. They would follow their orders, but that didn’t mean they had to like them. Neither of the two demons were keen to stick around these tunnels any longer than they had to, and both of them were quite sure that this task would have been completed a lot sooner if their master actually helped.

However, Boxxy had no intention of personally coming down there unless it was absolutely necessary. This wasn’t because it was being lazy or somehow felt that trudging through ruined sewers was somehow beneath it. It was just busy raising its Doppelganger Job at the moment, and the method it was using didn’t leave it with a lot of opportunities to go skulking about in a sewer. At least, not quite yet.

The thing about doppelgangers was that they were infiltrators, which was why Boxxy’s actions prior to leaving Bootlick three weeks ago gave it far fewer Levels than expected. Although the monster still thought of itself as a mimic, which was to say a creature that lived to prey on humans and other enlightened beings, this was no longer the case. Even though it still had its old Job and most of its chest-bound instincts remained intact, its species and Main Job had both changed to a doppelganger’s. Once it thought about it more deeply, the monster realized that doing the same things it did prior to its Rank Up and expecting the same outcome was a mistake.

The truth of the matter was that not all Jobs progressed through combat. An Alchemist raised their Level by brewing potions. A Laborer would do the same through intensive labor, such as hauling cargo, digging ditches, and chopping wood. A Bard would sing songs, play instruments and tell stories. The Doppelganger Job was also among these non-combatants, requiring that the monster live among people as one of their own rather than ambush, kill, and eat them as a mimic would. Hunting alongside other apprentice Rangers, conversing with people at the market or just shaking hands with someone it met for the first time—any and all social interactions with the

unsuspecting elves contributed towards the monster's next Doppelganger Level. It was a steady stream of XP that meant it could get stronger as long as it maintained its cover.

Well, that wasn't to say that it would suddenly become a pacifist. Being a monster meant that Doppelgangers still thrived on bloodshed and carnage somewhat, even if it wasn't the 'correct' way to raise the Job's Levels. Besides, even if it could sate its hunger by filling up on termites or hylt fruit, the former mimic still wanted to dine on people. Eating tasty things was still more or less its main goal in life, so it saw no reason to avoid chowing down on people whenever possible. Those opportunities were few and far between, as Boxxy didn't really have the option to skulk around in the sewers or back alleys looking for dinner. It had to work hard if it was to establish an identity, forge relationships and earn the trust of others. Doing so would allow it to gain Doppelganger Levels much faster than if it simply hid in a dark corner somewhere and only came out in order to buy or sell things. The more people it fooled, the more XP it would earn.

It was therefore important to stand out just enough to leave a favorable or lasting impression, but not too much so as to raise suspicion. Walking that fine line was quite challenging and had to be done carefully. Even if Boxxy felt like a wolf hiding among sheep, a lot of those sheep were heavily armed and more than a few of them were considerably stronger than the wolf.

Honestly speaking, the creature never thought it would find itself in such a position. If someone had told Boxxy's past self that it would end up with social obligations, it would have stabbed them in the face and eaten them. Granted, it would've probably tried to do that anyway, but it would have done so much more maliciously. And yet it had spent an entire week talking to people without trying to eat them.

It couldn't really complain though. It had already gotten up to Level 13 of its Doppelganger Job, despite doing relatively little fighting or murdering. Its schedule was a bit too full for that at the moment, but this was bound to change when it graduated from Faehorn's Ranger class. After that, it would have a lot more free time to focus on its Artificer Job or just enjoy its ever-growing collection of shiny things. It was also to that end that it really

wanted to establish a lair and use the dungeon core as a sort of security and home management system.

“Master,” called out Xera once again, “I think I’ve found the nest.”

Something which looked like it would happen sooner rather than later.

Part Five

Xera had spent a good half hour climbing up the narrow passage inside the hylt tree's root. Thankfully it got a bit wider as she got higher up, though not wide enough to let spread her wings and fly up it. Eventually it stopped going upwards and evened out a bit, allowing her to crawl rather than climb. She really had no idea what her position relative to the ground was, as her entire world consisted of nothing but the chewed-up walls of a lumber tunnel.

A few minutes later, the tight passage opened up into the side of a large, hollowed out chamber that was vaguely cylindrical. It was mind-bogglingly tall, as it went so far straight up that she couldn't even see the top. As for the shape itself, it was irregular to say the least. The termites had eaten away at the insides of the mighty tree with reckless abandon, leaving the walls of this tall cavern riddled with numerous ridges, cliffs and caves. In fact, the passage that Xera was currently poking her head out of was only one of what appeared to be hundreds of tunnels lining the walls of this space.

Looking down from her tiny perch, she saw the uneven bottom of the hollowed-out tree trunk some forty or fifty meters below. She assumed the bottom was down there, but she couldn't actually see it. Hundreds of large insects crawled all over it, completely hiding the ground floor from view. The walls surrounding the succubus were also thick with what she now estimated to be thousands of the creatures.

The seasoned succubus cast her gaze further upwards and noted that, thankfully, the writhing mass of termites did not extend all the way up to the top of this place. The extra-large colony appeared to have been steadily eating their way downwards over the course of a long time, so the vast majority of the swarm was concentrated here. The succubus wasn't sure what her current altitude was, but she had a sneaking suspicion these guys had started at the very top of the tree.

"Master, I think I've found the nest," she reported with a hint of sarcasm.

"Can you take care of it yourself?"

“Probably, but… are you sure? I mean, using fire in a cave made out of wood is a little…”

“It’ll be fine. That timber is resistant to magic so it won’t catch fire. The elves do this sort of thing all the time.”

“Understood. What about the enemy? There’s quite a lot of them you know.”

“So?”

“So… wouldn’t they be good fodder for your Job Levels?”

“Those termites are way too pathetic. I’d just be wasting my time on them.”

If one were to kill something that was much, much weaker than themselves, then they would get practically no combat XP. There was nothing to be learned from stomping on a few defenseless ants, which was exactly what this would equate to, if Boxxy did things personally. Okay, maybe this particular hive counted as more than ‘a few,’ but that was beside the point.

“What about your Ranger Job?”

That one was a different story altogether. Since the ‘ganger’s newly acquired Ranger Job was still relatively low Level, it was bound to go up significantly with this much prey.

“Can’t let it grow too quickly, otherwise that Faehorn guy will realize something’s up.”

As expected of a seasoned elf Ranger, he had sharp intuition and easily spotted things that were out of place. Boxxy had to hold back immensely whenever that guy was around, and performing down to those other apprentices’ Level was surprisingly difficult. However, the monster learned quite a bit by doing so.

It was ironic, in a way. Faehorn’s teachings about being able to control one’s power to the utmost were intended as a way to maximize an adventurer’s effectiveness when fighting monsters. Yet a monster in his care was applying that approach in order to minimize its power in an attempt to blend in completely with a group of trainee adventurers. And it seemed to work beautifully.

Though a welcome boon, that control training hadn't been why Boxxy enlisted as a Ranger. It wanted to be one because those nimble hunters were unmatched when it came to stalking, tracking, pursuing and cornering a target. Not only that, but it was a Job that benefited greatly from the monster's already high Dexterity (DEX) and Agility (AGI) Attributes.

The bow was also a very useful and versatile weapon. Even if it lacked the destructive power of Spells and required expendable ammunition, it was perfectly silent and had a far greater range. One could also use special arrowheads to produce Spell-like effects. For instance, a forward-thinking shapeshifter might use its Artificer Job to create explosive projectiles that detonated on impact. The weight and weird shape of the arrow would greatly diminish its accuracy, but that wasn't much of a problem considering it could just fire it into a crowd and have the shrapnel do the rest.

"So, I should take them on by myself?" Xera asked for confirmation.

"That's right."

If the summoned familiar were to take them out, then there would still be some improvement regarding Boxxy's Warlock Job. That particular occupation could grow as much as it wanted since Spell-related Attributes and Skills had no way of interfering with a thoroughly non-magical bow and arrow. It also had no intention of revealing its identity as a Warlock to others. At least, none of the people knew its identity as a Ranger. It still didn't have to go down there personally. A termite's weakness was fire, and its favorite Snack, who had currently grown to a Level 39 Succubus and Level 28 Pyromancer, was more than suited to the task at hand.

"Wipe them out," it ordered.

"Yes, Master!" she replied with an oddly enthusiastic voice.

The succubus did not particularly enjoy violence like a certain four-armed sex friend of hers, but she did have an intense desire to set the world on fire. And while making the literal world go up in flame was beyond her means, turning these blissfully unaware insects' reality to ashes was the next best thing. Her pyromaniac side hadn't been given a chance to shine in a long

while, so being able to incinerate so many squishy things at once practically made her giddy.

To begin with, she crawled out of the small tunnel she was in, spread her wings, and took flight. She snapped her fingers, causing her fake staff to appear out of nowhere and float idly next to her for a moment before she grabbed it out of the air. This wasn't really a magic item, but more of an empty shell she held onto out of habit. Gesturing with it while casting her Pyroclasm Spells just felt… right. It was only natural to hold onto her long and hard thing while spraying a hot load all over-

"AHEM!"

Xera cleared her throat in order to help reign in her errant thoughts and focused on the task at hand. The termites were bound to notice her presence soon, so she had to take advantage of the element of surprise. She floated down to the bottom and pointed her imitation staff towards the writhing mass of insects beneath her and activated one of her Pyromancer Skills.

"Summon Molten Guardian!"

An intense red glow flashed for an instant within the crawling abyss, followed by an explosion of molten rock and flames. Numerous termites were sent flying everywhere as the Molten Guardian quite literally erupted from beneath them with a deep roar. It was a fearsome creature in the vague shape of a one-meter-tall lizard. Its thick torso and short, pudgy legs consisted of black, smouldering rocks with red-hot molten lava dripping slightly from the gaps between them, giving off the bizarre appearance of blood vessels filled with liquid fire. Its long, thick tail and short, flat face were pure fire given form. It had a row of white-hot stone spikes running along its back, right where its spine would be if it had one of those.

"Get 'em, Smokey!"

The Molten Guardian obeyed with a roar as it leapt into the swarm that had noticed too late there was an intruder in their nest. However, their instincts were torn between repelling the intruder and not getting roasted alive, so the termites had fallen into disarray. 'Smokey' wasn't going to give them a choice in the matter, though. Its fiery jaws and tail, burning claws and incinerating breath washed over the defenseless creatures with the heat of a

miniature volcano. Smoke, steam and disgusting juices flew everywhere as the pests quite literally popped open en masse from the intense heat.

“Flamethrower!”

A cone-shaped torrent of flames erupted from Xera’s staff at her call, bathing the chamber’s wall in an almost-literal sea of fire. There was an ear-wrenching, squeaking hiss as dozens of termites burned to a crisp in a matter of seconds. Their flaming bodies fell down to the ground, causing Xera’s Devouring Flames to spread even further.

Noticing the airborne threat, the insects attempted to leap off the walls and latch onto the succubus. At least this was a target they could sink their mandibles into. Or so they thought.

“Blast Wave!”

A pulse of intense heat erupted from the winged demon, sending the termites who were about to envelop her flying in every direction while setting them ablaze. She turned her attention to another section of the wall and doused it in a Flamethrower Spell, followed by another Blast Wave. She then threw her trademark Inferno Spell towards the ground, right on top of the rampaging Molten Guardian.

Rather than being harmed by the roaring tornado of flames, the lava lizard actually absorbed them into itself, causing it to grow slightly in size. It gave off a gut-wrenching roar before flying into yet another bug-stomping spree, only this time with much more speed and ferocity.

A Molten Guardian was an elemental, a mindless golem-like construct conjured out of raw mana. This one in particular had been imbued with a composite magic that was attuned to both earth and fire. Much like other summoning-type Skills, it was a manifestation of the caster’s magical power. It fed off magical flames in order to momentarily grow stronger and was impervious to physical attacks, but the downside was that its summoner had to constantly supply it with MP to sustain it. Even Xera’s impressive capacity of nearly 4,000 MP would only allow it to exist for about six or seven minutes before she ran dry.

This raised a troubling question. The succubus looked at her surroundings, carefully gauging how much of the pests she and Smokey had managed to clear out.

“Slow. Too slow!” she complained to nobody in particular.

No matter how many termites were squashed or burned, more of them just kept pouring in from the tunnels that lined the walls. They kept coming, seemingly without end. Even if they were pathetically weak, there were just too many of them. If things carried on like this, she’d run out of MP before she could deal with all of those critters. The staggering amount of work it would take to fully clean up this place made her wish this blasted tree would just explode already.

“… Yeah, that’s a thing I could try,” she mumbled.

An idea had formed in her mind while she stared upward. It was a stupid idea, but one that might just work, given the size of the place. She was also sure to enjoy the outcome, even if it was a failure, so she decided it was worth a try. She lowered her altitude and touched down on the charcoal-like ground. She gave the order for Smokey to keep those things away from her and started chanting. It was a long incantation, one that went on for about eight seconds before she finished it.

“Meteor!”

The top of the impossibly tall cavern lit up with a bright yellow light. As illogical as it was, a huge ball of molten rock that was at least three meters in diameter fell through the air, directly towards the succubus and her summoned pet.

“Wow. That worked?”

She honestly felt surprised at this outcome. Although incredibly powerful, the Meteor Spell had quite a few problems with usability. The MP cost was high, both the incantation and the delay before it hit were long and it required a lot of headroom in order to pull off successfully. Trying to use it indoors would normally result in the Spell failing the caster’s body apart due to the magical backlash. This was rather disappointing, as the extreme masochist really needed some intense stimulation.

But even if she succeeded in casting the Spell due to the hollowed-out cavern's absurd proportions, it still wouldn't do much in the grand scheme of things. Sure, it would completely annihilate thirty or forty, maybe even fifty of the damned bugs, but that was a huge waste of magical power. A Flamethrower or Inferno Spell would be far more efficient, but calling down this miniature sun was merely the first part.

Xera pointed her staff directly at the rapidly approaching ball of death, and activated yet another Skill. One that let her detonate any of her Pyroclasm Spells while they were in mid-flight in order to massively increase their area of effect.

"Volcanic Burst!"

In the next instant, the mass of molten rock and flames exploded violently. Bright red-and-yellow debris spread in every direction, bathing the insides of the colossal hylt tree in flaming plumes of liquid lava. Hissing and popping noises could be heard from all over as the wriggling walls were coated in Xera's magical flames, which clung incessantly to everything and anything they touched.

What Boxxy said earlier was the truth. Hylt trees were quite resistant not only to physical trauma, but magic in general. That was why buildings and gear made of their Ironbark were considered extremely durable, despite being made of wood. This trait also allowed the elves to purge termite nests they found with flames without fear of burning the trees. It took significant effort to set these things ablaze, and if that were to actually happen, then the mana-suffused material would burn with a heat that no other living thing could muster.

This was precisely what was going on around Xera. Her especially stubborn flames managed to ignite the insides of the hylt tree, rapidly turning it into a furnace. The cavernous space had plenty of air, too. If left alone, the magic-fueled flames would surely spread and consume the entire tree in a matter of minutes.

"Huhuhuhuhuhuhu. HAHAHAHAHA! *AAAH HAH HAH HAH HAH HAH!!*"

The perpetrator herself didn't seem to actually care, though. Her manic laughter echoed through the blazing chamber, accompanied by the crackle and pop of hundreds of termites losing their lives each second. She didn't even notice that she was being burned by her own magic, nor would she care even if she did. She was engrossed by the wondrous sight of being surrounded by flames, smoke and ashes on all sides. It was as if reality itself was set ablaze, and she loved every single moment of it.

"Snack! What did you do?!"

Boxxy's sudden communication broke the succubus out of her reverie. Her Master sounded less than pleased, to say the least. And now that she had partly regained her composure, Xera realized that it had good reason to do so.

"I, um, went a bit overboard…"

"A bit?! I can see the smoke from out here! Put it out right away!"

"Even if you tell me that… Oh! Right! Smokey!"

The Molten Guardian that was busy mopping up the few surviving bugs on the ground stopped what it was doing and ran back to her side. It stood at attention, ready to receive new orders.

"Eat all of the fire in here!" the succubus commanded.

The flat-faced lava lizard turned its stare to the roaring tower of fire. It then looked at its summoner, then back up, then back to Xera once more. It was as if it was trying to say, 'Are you kidding me with this shit?' Even if one could theoretically order a minion to drink up the entire ocean or leap up into the stars, impossible things were impossible. And it was impossible for a single Molten Guardian to consume a mountain of flames seemingly hundreds of times larger than itself—something the succubus realized moments later.

"Don't question me just fucking do it!" she demanded.

The wholly un-sentient and completely mindless Molten Guardian rolled the bright red flames of its eyes as it ran towards the edge of the chamber and started climbing up the burning wall. It sucked in all the flames that blocked its path as it made its way upwards, but the charred embers it left

behind reignited mere seconds later. The succubus would have more luck trying to put this raging inferno out by squirting her lewd juices all over it.

Xera was just desperate enough to try that ludicrous idea, because it was the only one she had. The last thing she wanted was to let down her beloved master. It was hardly the first time she'd messed up, and Boxxy had gotten angry with her many times in the past. Things had always more or less worked out for her, but this? This would probably be the first time her Master would be disappointed in her, and that thought was… difficult to stomach. If asked to put that strange feeling into words, the succubus would probably reply that it was 'not tasty.'

The succubus passed out moments later. Well, as close to 'passing out' as she could get considering her high MNT Attribute. She still clung to consciousness and perceiving the burning inferno around her, her body no longer listening to her. Even if her flesh was born of magic, she still needed to breathe just like any other living being, and the thick and heavy smoke in the air made that quite difficult to do. She collapsed while choking on the byproducts of her own magic, a faint smile on her lips. Even under these circumstances, the relentlessly rotten part of her looked forward to the sweet agony of her skin being consumed by the flames.

Just then, she heard a noise. A thunderous, roaring sound coming from the smoke-obscured air above her came down on her at a frightening speed. It was so loud that it effortlessly drowned out the crackling of the flames. The succubus couldn't even guess as to what could be making it. That mystery didn't last long, as a literal waterfall came crashing down on her. The sudden deluge of foamy water completely and entirely quenched the flames, putting them out in an instant. It swept away the Molten Guardian that was still trying to follow its impossible orders, extinguishing it like a match in a typhoon.

The barely-conscious succubus was flabbergasted. Well, the good news was that the tree her Master wanted to use wouldn't burn down from her ineptitude, plus she was no longer choking. The bad news was that she was now drowning instead. Her limp body was tossed back and forth as the turbulent current settled itself. She no longer knew which way was up or

down, nor did she have a method of finding out. And yet, despite taking in so much water, her body outright refused to die.

[You are suffocating. HP -364.]
[You have bathed in the Waters of Life. HP +500.]
[You are suffocating. HP -364.]
[You have bathed in the Waters of Life. HP +500.]
[You are suffocating. HP -364.]
[You have bathed in the Waters of Life. HP +500]

It would appear this strange liquid was also magical in nature. It had restorative properties on par with high-grade healing potions, but none of the toxicity that led to potion sickness. Or at least, that's how it seemed to Xera. She wasn't all that familiar with the condition in question, but she didn't experience any weird side effects. The only odd thing she registered after spending three or four minutes drowning in the green-tinted liquid was a peculiar sense of familiarity, as if she'd done this many times before. She didn't get to explore that feeling before the stuff started draining away as suddenly as it had appeared.

"Koff koff! Hack! Koff!"

With the water levels receding, the succubus found herself sputtering up water while crawling on all fours atop a small outcropping of timber. She looked around her to find that, much to her surprise, the wooden insides of the tree were not charred or burned in the slightest. In fact, the wood actually seemed to be healthier than ever as the jagged, bug-eaten surface was covered in healthy, strong bark with white and yellow flowers growing from it. The mysterious flood of these so-called Waters of Life not only quenched the fire, but completely healed and reinvigorated the tree.

"Good 'morrow unto you, madam."

An eloquent voice coming from above reached Xera's ears. The succubus dumbly looked upwards to see a green-skinned woman with long, flowing vines for hair poking halfway out of the rejuvenated wooden ground directly in front of her. Her ears were pointed like an elf's and she had a pair of antler-like growths jutting out of the top of her head. Her breasts were even more bountiful than Xera's, although they were wrapped in

leaves and vines that kept her somewhat decent. Her beautiful face bore a green-lipped smile that exuded a sense of class and dignity.

“What?” the succubus responded, struck dumb by the unfamiliar creature’s appearance.

“Grant thee mercy for chasing those insects hence.”

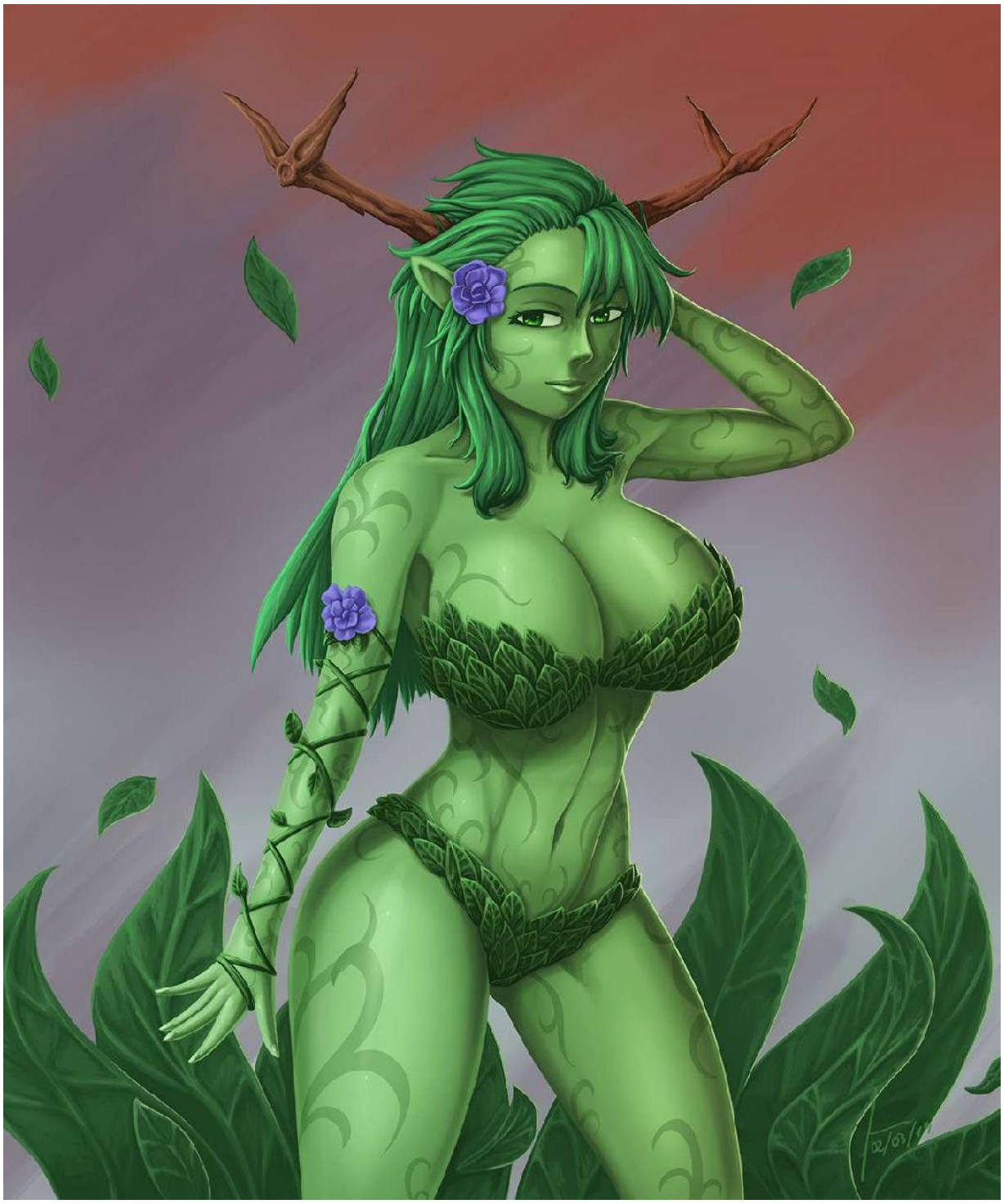
“*… What?!*”

She also had difficulty understanding that odd way of speaking.

“I owe thee one.”

The plant-woman seemed to grasp her confusion and clarified herself with a small bow before disappearing into the bark. She sank into it as if it were the surface of a pond, complete with tiny ripples that expanded outwards from her. Though Xera was not going to complain that her potentially catastrophic fire had been put out, it would appear she would still have to deliver some bad news to Boxxy.

Namely that this tree already had a resident.



Part Six

The twelve giant trees of Azurvale were a species of magical plant known as hylt, said to have been planted by the Goddess Nyrie herself. This was not actually the case, as they had been on this world since long before the deity in question came into existence—a living testament to nature's perseverance and endurance. So while the tree-hugging Goddess did not create them, she most certainly blessed them. The combination of her divine power and this sparse forest's ancient, venerable magic caused a truly unprecedented reaction.

A new type of existence had been born within each and every one of those colossal trees. The Goddess's blessing had drawn out and given form to their primordial will, while the hylt's unique nature had bestowed it with life and meaning. It was thus that the beings known as dryads came to be. Although very little was known about them, they were largely believed to be spirits charged with the never-ending duty of protecting and nourishing the tree they had been born from.

Truthfully, it was folly to think of a dryad and her hylt as separate entities. They were two parts of the same whole, and one could not survive without the other. The sacrilegious act chopping or burning down a hylt tree would cause the death of the dryad, while separating the tree's spirit from its home by force would cause both of them to gradually wither and die. This was one of the many reasons why these plant-like women very rarely showed themselves to outsiders.

Because of that their existence was considered nothing more than myth and legend by the very elves that lived atop their branches and around their roots. There were, of course, select individuals that these reclusive beings showed themselves to, but they would need to have performed a considerable service to the tree for that to happen.

This was probably why one of them presented herself to the strange winged woman that had helped rid her of that persistent termite problem. Although she was starting to regret that decision.

"Come on out!"

A loud shout echoed within the former termites' nest. Its source was a bizarre creature unlike anything else the dryad had seen before. Granted, she hadn't seen much since her kind typically remained blissfully unaware of the world at large, but she was still able to classify that thing as clearly abnormal.

"I said get out here! I have to talk with you!"

It wasn't because the magic user from earlier disappeared in a puff a smoke and was replaced by this thing. Teleportation magic was something the elves used quite a bit, so she already knew of its existence. It also wasn't because of this creature's strange appearance of a wooden treasure chest walking on eight spider-like legs. Even if she was somewhat ignorant, the dryad still knew about mimics and what they were capable of. In fact, one could say that mimics were her offspring, given that it was her timber that the first of them had been born from, even if it had been a mortal elf who gave them life.

What the dryad took issue with was the fact that this creature mimicked the appearance of a mimic, despite not being one itself. She had clearly seen its original humanoid form following its appearance, so she was completely baffled as to why it would take on such an odd shape. If it was just a simple box with legs, then she might humor it with an appearance. If it was a mindless beast, then she wouldn't particularly mind playing with it for a while, maybe even taking it in as a pet. It wouldn't be the first time she had done something like that, but that thought was far from her mind right now.

"I know you're around here!"

Whatever this thing was, it was clearly intelligent. Beings that showed intent in their actions were inherently suspicious, as they almost always had ulterior motives. This was why even if she were to show herself to mortals, she did so very briefly. The ones who had seen her were usually awestruck. They considered themselves lucky and moved on with their lives. The event had inspired many of them to continue protecting her beloved tree or spreading her precious seeds. The rest of them—the individuals that stuck around and wanted to 'talk' with her—always had selfish goals, and this one was no different.

“If you don’t show yourself, then I will assume you have no problem with me living here!”

Wait, what? It wanted to live *here*? *Inside* of her?! Was this thing nuts?

“Okay! Since you have no complaints, then I will just do as I please!”

She had plenty of complaints, actually. Branches and roots were one thing, but dryads absolutely despised having other creatures inside themselves. After all, what living being would willingly welcome parasites? On the other hand, a single monster like this was nothing compared to the thousands of termites that were here beforehand, so she could probably put up with it. Besides, she doubted this thing was actually serious. It would probably get bored and leave soon enough anyway.

That’s when it opened a swirling black portal, and a clear crystal ball that was fifty centimeters in diameter fell out. The dryad had no idea what it was, but she had a bad feeling about it. One that was proven to be justified when it started sucking up all of the mana in the air like some sort of sponge. She needed that mana! Especially since she just spent so much energy to douse that fire and heal her burns.

Realizing that continuing to ignore this creature was probably a bad idea, the dryad decided she would need to make an appearance.

Boxxy had just taken the dormant dungeon core out of its Storage and was looking for a good place to serve as the dungeon’s heart when the wooden outcropping it was standing on started rippling like a puddle in the wind. A green, plant-like woman rose out of it as if something was pushing her out from beneath the surface. Her skin glowed with an eerie green light, chasing away much of the surrounding darkness. Her proportions were outrageously voluptuous and her figure could easily rival that of a succubus. She was mostly naked, except for a series of leaves that covered the underside of her breasts as well as her pelvic area. This was obviously the ‘resident’ that Snack mentioned earlier, and her emerald eyes showed that she was clearly not amused.

“Alright, let us speak,” she said in a deep, mature voice while crossing her arms under her outrageous cleavage. “What manner of business would thou hath with one such as I?”

“You talk funny,” Boxxy noted.

“Thy speech is the comical one from mine perspective,” she retorted.

“I see…”

“I pray thee, put away thy profane object so that we may converse.”

She pointed at the dungeon core that was already gathering up the ambient mana. It was something it started doing all on its own in order to test the environment and determine whether it would be suitable for establishing a dungeon. The mana density in this area wasn’t quite as high as the core’s former home, but it seems to have determined that it would be sufficient. It was obvious that the shapeshifter’s intention to claim this cavern as its dungeon lair would have to wait, so it obediently put it back inside its Storage.

“Very good,” commented the green woman. “Now then, what doth thou need of me?”

“I want to live here,” repeated Boxxy.

“… Truly?”

“Truly.”

“Why?”

“It’s convenient.”

“How so?”

“It’s safe, hidden and is right in the middle of the city. I can hide my shiny things here while I’m out getting more shiny things, and I can work on my Jobs and Skills in peace.”

“What doth thou mean by shiny things?”

Boxxy momentarily opened its Storage and took out several gold coins, then presented them to the dryad, using its tongue-tentacle in lieu of a hand.

“Ah. ‘Tis gold?”

“Not *just* gold,” the ex-mimic insisted.

It then took out several other things from its collection. It showed off some sparkling gemstones, a few glowing rocks, several pieces of gilded silverware, a small silver statue of a knight and even its prized mithril daggers. The plant lady seemed thoroughly unimpressed. She briefly raised an eyebrow when Boxxy took out a jar of Shiny Juice, formally known as Honeydew, but didn't seem to care enough to comment about it.

"So thou shall not attempt to consume mine bark and branches?"

"No. Wood isn't very tasty. Fruits are okay, though."

"Then tell me, creature-"

"Boxxy."

"Pardon?"

"My name. It's Boxxy. Boxxy T. Morningwood."

"Oh? Thou hast a splendid name," she said with a hint of admiration.

"Thanks, I think so too," the shapeshifter responded casually.

"Mine is Ambrosia, the dryad of this tree. 'Tis a pleasure to make thy acquaintance."

"Likewise."

The green woman seemed to relax a bit now that the formal introductions were out of the way. She behaved strangely like a person, even though she should technically be a monster, which meant that Boxxy's recently acquired social skills were being put to surprisingly good use.

"So Boxxy, what be thy relation to the… chill-challenged woman that cleansed mine insides from those hateful vermin?"

"That's Snack, one of my minions. Ah, she went overboard with the fire, so sorry about that."

It wasn't a sincere apology of course, more of a formality.

"'Tis of no consequence, young one. Extreme measures were necessary to purge that infestation. It would have surely devoured mine whole being if left unattended. Therefore, I owe thee and thy servant mine thanks."

“Then I will gladly accept them. But how come you couldn’t chase them out on your own? You should be able to do at least that much, right?”

The dryad’s stoic expression gradually became one of sadness and shame.

“I am no longer able to defend myself from those creatures. I hath tried poisoning them, flooding them out and trapping them in brambles. It worked the first few times, but those tenacious heathens always overcame mine attempts and returned stronger and more numerous. The power of fire remains their constant weakness, but I find myself unable to conjure flames by my own power. Eventually I ran out of ways to fend them off, and found myself at their mercy.”

“Such is the natural order of things,” Boxxy said sagely.

“‘Tis so.”

Those who did not adapt were devoured. It was the cruel truth of nature, something both parties understood firsthand.

“What about those Waters of Life you used earlier?”

“Ah. That substance is a mixture of the dew gathered from mine leaves and the sap from mine body.”

“Don’t suppose you can let me have some?”

“‘Tis a simple matter, but would be of little use to thee as medicine,” she cautioned. “Thou art not the first to express interest in it mine fluids, but one must fully submerge themselves in the Waters of Life in order to be healed. Simply drinking some will not accomplish much more than to satiate one’s thirst, and its properties shalt dissipate rapidly once removed from mine interior.”

Boxxy had expected this response. Of course a literal waterfall of high-grade, toxicity-free healing potion would be too good to be true. Not to mention that it did already sample some of the stuff from the puddles that were strewn around the place. Although it was tasty, it showed absolutely no magical effects, just as she claimed. Since it was highly unlikely that it would be able to take a bath in the middle of a fight, this substance’s practical usefulness was rapidly approaching zero. There ought to be some way to use this for profit, but such thoughts would have to wait until later.

It still wanted to establish a dungeon within this tree, and judging from the way this dryad spoke she was more than just a resident here, she was the owner. Perhaps even a manifestation of the tree itself, seeing as how she referred to it as her own body. Although it was unaware as to the true capabilities of her species, the avatar of a millennia-old magical plant was clearly not one to be trifled with.

Boxxy Saw a way to obtain not only her permission in establishing a dungeon, but also her cooperation. Perhaps her servitude as well.

“So about these termites, they’ll come back, right?”

“‘Tis so, young Morningwood. The biggest nest was cleared out due to thy servant’s efforts, but ‘tis hardly the only one. Could be in a month, a year, or a decade, but they shall return to full strength without fail.”

“What if I told you I have a way for you to control those bugs?”

“Control, not exterminate?”

“That’s right. Tell me, do you know what a dungeon is?”

“Does thou mean the underground prisons those elves have built beneath mine roots?”

“No. Wrong type of dungeon. The one I’m talking about involves the, um, ‘profane object’ you saw earlier.”

The shapeshifter then spoke at length about what it had learned about dungeon cores over the past month or so. First, they had absorbed a certain amount of magical energy and attune themselves to their magically enriched environment. After that, they had to be anchored in a magically affixed position, at which point the dungeon would be officially established, and its territory could expand as long as the surrounding mana density permitted. All of that was controlled by the core’s first basic function—Dungeon Expansion.

The second one—Item Allocation—had to do with distributing rewards to any and all adventurers that managed to fulfil certain conditions. An example of this would be reaching a specific point in the dungeon in a set amount of time, defeating a tough enemy or simply coming across a treasure chest. The items in question had to come through external means

and would be stored within a pocket dimension bound to the dungeon core, similar to a mimic's Storage. It was possible to forge items out of pure mana, but such things would disappear the instant someone tried to take them out of the dungeon.

The monster Didn't have any plans to use this function, nor did it have any idea why anyone would willingly give out treasures. It was like breaking into someone's house, killing their dog, and having the residents happily cook and serve the poor animal to the intruder. However, it took this opportunity to point out that it was possible to create temporary or single-use magic items with which one could fend off intruders. One of said items was a Rod of Fire, which produced a Flamethrower-like effect at will.

The third basic function was Mana Collection. This allowed the dungeon core's owner to regulate the rate at which the surrounding mana was absorbed. Maintaining the dungeon's various functions required MP as fuel and not all of it could be recycled. Even if it would eventually come back on its own, it was important to properly manage this resource in order to keep all of the dungeon's facilities running. It was also important to the dryad that the magical energy in question was something she needed in order to sustain herself and her hylt tree.

However, the basic function that really caught her attention was the fourth one. The Monster Spawner menu could be used to determine the type of monsters that appeared inside the dungeon and could exert a certain amount of control over them. Meaning it was entirely possible to gain dominion over those simple-minded termites and order them to kill themselves en-masse. If not, there was also the option of spawning some of their natural predators in order to control and contain their spread, perhaps wipe them out completely.

The fifth function—the Surveillance Net—was the one Boxxy wanted to take advantage of the most. It collected information regarding everything that happened within the dungeon core's sphere of influence. It was possible to Appraise any and all intruders and their gear, not to mention it would automatically log their progress through the dungeon. Most importantly, it could instantly notify the shapeshifter should any unauthorized individuals try to encroach on its stash of shinies. Well, that

wasn't to say that the individual directly in front of it wasn't suspicious, but she seemed genuinely disinterested in its collection.

There were also five advanced features to a dungeon core, although those demanded a much larger amount of MP to operate compared to the basic ones. Guardian Assignment allowed the appointment of extra-powerful monsters to guard key junctions. Again, something Boxxy had no interest in actually putting to use. Nexus Access, on the other hand, was a curious one that not only allowed the core's owner to instantly teleport anywhere within the dungeon, but could also transport them to any other dungeons that might be under their rule.

Prison Management was there in case Boxxy wanted to keep certain individuals alive for extended periods of time. It would provide them with a living space and cater to their basic needs using magic. There was also the matter of the ominously-named Interrogation Room that could be built and maintained through the Prison Management menu.

Next up was Terrain Sculpting, a feature that would allow the dungeon's owner to change the layout of their dungeon at will. It was unclear as to whether a living mass of timber would count as 'terrain,' but there was a good possibility that it would. After all, that hedge maze in the Spire of the Jade King was clearly plant-like in origin and could still benefit from the dungeon's auto-repair feature, courtesy of Terrain Sculpting. This was also the thing that maintained the warped space inside the Spire itself, which opened up a lot of interesting possibilities.

The final advanced feature was Trap Construction, which was the one Boxxy looked forward to experimenting with the most. Teleportation circles, spiked floors, poisonous gas, trap doors, swinging guillotines, crushing ceilings, anti-air countermeasures—all manner of deliciously devious devices could be built in an instant. The former mimic was particularly eager to see what those booby-trapped chests were like.

"How wondrous!" the dryad exclaimed once Boxxy finished its presentation. Her face lit up with joy. "If this dungeon core is truly as powerful as thou claim, then I would no longer have to worry about any pests nibbling at mine bark or sensitive heartwood!"

“It’s only as powerful as the mana in the environment,” reiterated Boxxy, “but inside here should prove to be more than enough to handle some pesky bugs. So, how about it, Ambrosia? I will establish a dungeon inside this chamber, and you can be my... *its* dungeon master.”

“A dungeon master?” she asked dubiously. “What doth that entail?”

“You get to control all of the basic functions I told you about, but only I get to play around with the advanced ones.”

“So, like a steward?”

“That’s one way to put it.”

“Are there any other limitations?”

“You, or rather, the part of you I’m speaking to, would need to remain inside the dungeon’s boundaries at all times.”

“I hath no intent to venture beyond mine bark, so that is agreeable.”

“Also, I will have supreme authority within the dungeon since I’m the core’s owner, but I’ll mostly leave you to do your thing.”

Her eyelids twitched slightly at that first bit. Well, saying someone else would be the ‘supreme authority’ of part of her body was understandably not to her liking. However, she didn’t deny the offer outright.

“What if thou were to perish?”

“Then I suppose you would become the owner.”

“Oh? Thou art rather forthcoming with such sensitive information.”

“I’m not even six months old. Assuming I would outlive someone as ancient as you is a stupid notion.”

“Hmm, I suppose so.”

“So, what do you say? If we team up, then you can manage your pest problems under your own power, and I have a hideout to use as I see fit.”

“I must say, ‘tis a very tempting proposition.”

Ambrosia closed her eyes in thought. She didn’t particularly mind having this creature called Boxxy take up residence inside her tree, not when it

offered this much rent in return. Of course, she would have to give up a certain amount of her ‘food’ in order to maintain this dungeon it wanted to make, but it wasn’t that big a deal. The mana coursing through this cavern only accounted for about a quarter of the total she pulled up from deep beneath the ground. That said, the consumption would need to be regulated. She could still survive even if that strange crystal ball sucked up every last drop of it, although she wouldn’t be able to produce her fruits and spread her seeds.

“I just have one more inquiry.”

Countless numbers of vines sprouted from the ground beneath Boxxy and wrapped around it in an instant. They completely bound the creature and tightened their grip on its faux-wood shell as if threatening to squeeze the life right out of it. Numerous sharp brambles dug furiously into its ‘skin,’ causing its dark-red doppelganger blood to ooze out of the wounds.

“What’s to stop me from crushing thee right here and now, and claiming this dungeon core for mine own?” the dryad asked with a clearly hostile attitude.

“Right back at you.”

Dozens of short, steel blades suddenly sprouted from the fake mimic’s surface, cutting apart the plants that had entwined themselves around it. After breaking free, the creature rapidly grew in size many times until it became a three-meter-tall imitation of the demonic overlord called Nagnamor, complete with armor and glaive courtesy of Metal Mimicry.

“What’s to stop *me* from ripping this tree apart and having my minion burn it to the ground?”

It even spoke with the same deep, booming voice, although the non-flaming skull meant it didn’t have nearly the same impact as the original.

“Do not presume to treat me like one of those idiotic bugs!” it roared.

The dryad did not even flinch at the obvious threat and otherwise terrifying demonic appearance. Rather than being intimidated, she actually broke into a large smile and stared ferociously at it.

“Heh. Hehehehe!”

“Hah hah hah hah hah hah!”

Each of them gave off a malicious, dry laugh while staring the other down and baring their fangs, literal or otherwise. In the end, both of them were monsters. So what if they were intelligent or appeared amicable? Ultimately, the only thing that mattered to either was themselves, and they would not hesitate to kill in order to fulfil their selfish desires.

“Very well, Boxxy T. Morningwood! This one shall agree to thine bargain!”

“Looking forward to working with you, Ambrosia!”

But that didn’t mean they couldn’t compromise. Boxxy would have to share its living space with this plant woman, but it didn’t particularly mind since it would mean added security. The dryad, on the other hand, would receive the means by which to exterminate everything and anything she deemed as pests, but had to agree to serve as this creature’s host. Both of them stood to profit immensely if they worked together, whereas the only thing violence and hostilities would earn them was massive injuries.

“Well, then!” declared Boxxy while reverting to its preferred chesty form. “I’ll go find a good spot to form the dungeon’s heart!”

Having obtained the dryad’s consent, the doppelganger once again took out the dungeon core from Storage. Much like before, the crystal orb immediately began sucking in the ambient magical energy at a staggering rate. After about five minutes, it had grown back to its initial size of about one meter in diameter and gave off a bright yellow light, almost like a miniature sun. By the time it finished charging up, Boxxy had scouted a prime location within this cavernous nest. It had ultimately decided to use a fairly flat and considerably wide wooden plateau as the dungeon’s innermost sanctum. It stood in the middle of it, and held the now-charged dungeon core above its head.

“Dungeon Expansion: Create Dungeon!”

The core’s yellow shine brightened as it responded to its owner’s command. It rose steadily into the air, climbing to an altitude of about seven meters above its owner. It then sprouted eight thick chains made of solid white light, which stretched out and waved around like drunken serpents living

things. Two of them latched onto the floor, three onto the surrounding walls and three more to the air itself. Once all of them were in place, they gradually faded from view as the core became firmly affixed to that one spot. The crystal orb then let out a massive wave of mana that washed over its surroundings. It was a burst of magic thick enough to make both Boxxy and Ambrosia wobble on their feet.

[Congratulations, your dungeon has been established!]
[Please state the name this dungeon.]

“Dryad’s Domain,” it spoke aloud, and the core flashed two times in response.

The dryad wondered what that was about, but got her answer in the next instant.

[You have now entered Dryad’s Domain.]

“Appoint Dungeon Master: Ambrosia.”

[Dryad’s Domain has recognized you as its rightful ruler.]
[Do you wish to claim ownership of this dungeon?]
[Yes]
[No]

“Oh. How flattering,” she said dryly while selecting the ‘Yes’ option in her head.

[Ambrosia has been appointed as the dungeon master of Dryad’s Domain.]

“What is?” Boxxy asked curiously.

“Thou named it after myself.”

“It’s not flattery. It’s misdirection.”

“Misdirection? How so?”

“If someone comes here, I want them to think you’re in charge.”

“I *am* in charge.”

“Of course, you are. I merely meant that I don’t want my presence to be known.”

“I see. So how do I actually control this thing?”

“Just say ‘Dungeon Management.’ You can probably figure it out from there.”

“Dungeon Management.”

[Dungeon Management]
[Core ID # PT-5484-BM]
Active (Dryad’s Domain)
Owned by Boxxy T. Morningwood
Managed by Ambrosia
92% Integrity
4,532/20,000 MP (+15.6/sec)

[Basic Functions]
Dungeon Expansion – Active
Item Allocation – Disabled
Mana Collection – Active
Monster Spawner – Disabled
Surveillance Net – Disabled

[Advanced Features]
Guardian Assignment – Access Denied
Nexus Access – Access Denied
Prison Management – Access Denied
Terrain Sculpting – Access Denied
Trap Construction – Access Denied

“Oh, how curious!” the dryad exclaimed. “Hmm? The Integrity is… this thing is damaged?!”

“It’ll fix itself with time. Part of the Mana Collection function,” the shapeshifter explained. “Anyway, I’m sorry to core and run, but it’s nearly dawn and I have other matters to attend to. I’ll leave you to get better acquainted with the dungeon’s functions.”

“Very well, milord. I look forward to thine return.”

Boxxy disappeared several seconds later by activating the Transfamiliar Spell and changing places with Xera in a puff of smoke. The succubus

shook her head a few times as she got her bearings. She looked at the glowing dungeon core and then at the plant lady from before, who was investigating the various menus and features she had gained control over.

“Ah, forgive me milady,” she said politely. “This one is called Ambrosia. Thou art milord Morningwood’s servant called ‘Snack,’ correct?”

“Hmm, that’s more or less right. Good to meet you, Ambrosia.”

“The pleasure is all mine. Milady Snack is quite the capable magic user, so I expect to learn a lot from thou.”

“So it managed to catch another one, huh?” the demoness mumbled.

“Pardon, milady?”

“No, nothing dearie,” the succubus replied with a smile. “Don’t mind me, just thinking aloud.”

“Understood. Now, if thou would excuse me, milord has given this one much to learn, so I must take mine leave and focus on the task at hand.”

The dryad submerged into the wooden ground with a polite bow while Xera’s smile spread wider until it became a wide, malicious grin. She wondered how long it would take for that dryad to realize what was happening to her. No, thinking about it more logically, the question wasn’t ‘when,’ but ‘if.’

After all, a dungeon core’s ability to reprogram a monster’s way of thinking was scarily effective.

Part Seven

One of the detriments of living under Azurvale's hylt tree canopy was that direct sunlight was a luxury. Though countless stray rays pierced through the gaps in the leaves to provide illumination, they were diluted and diffused to invisibility by the time they reached the ground. That said, there were still a number of sizeable gaps in the green ceiling that allowed an unobstructed view of the heavens. As a result, one could clearly see numerous columns of the sun's warm light slowly sweep across the city like natural spotlights, highlighting certain buildings.

One such structure was a four-story structure that looked more like a mansion than an office building. It was painted in an eye-catching sky-blue color that shone in the morning sunlight. Its flat and fenced-off roof could be easily accessed like an unofficial fifth floor, making it stand out amidst the sea of red tiles that covered all of the buildings around it. It had numerous windows that let in as much light as possible, although a few of them seemed to have been boarded up from the inside. This eye-catching structure was known as the Central Consortium and served as the headquarters to eight of the country's largest guilds. These disparate organizations shared a decades-long history of cooperation, each of them covering a different area of expertise.

It was, in essence, a place that had something for everyone.

Anyone wishing to become a heavily armored powerhouse needed look no further than the Knights of Elena. Youngsters seeking a more subtle approach to adventuring as scouts and hunters enlisted with Hidden Arrow. Individuals drawn to darker and morally ambiguous practices such as necromancy, demonology, and assassination had a home within the Maleficium. Broken Mirror, on the other hand, offered training in the destructive power offered by the orthodox arcane arts practiced by the likes of Wizards, Pyromancers and Cryomancers. The Blessed of Nyrie was a religious organization that trained Paladins, Priests and Monks of all faiths, despite what its name suggested. Then there was the Children of the Wild guild, which had a marked focus on Shamans, Druids and Monster Tamers —occupations that drew upon various aspects of nature.

However, though these six adventurer guilds made up the majority of the Central Consortium, the coalition also had two artisan guilds with a focus on crafting and production. The first of those was the Hammers of Horkensaft, which primarily consisted of dwarven smiths and gnomish engineers. Their specialty was the production of the various arms and armors for adventurers, and they also made a plethora of common trinkets and tools that interested the general public. The other crafting-oriented guild was the Magus Emporium, which dealt with enchanting, alchemy and magic items in general. They also performed research in the fields of botany and biology, to a lesser extent.

The goal of the Central Consortium and the alliance of guilds within it was to provide a gathering hub for adventurers with varying skill sets. Common sense dictated that it was folly of them to embark on dangerous Quests and long journeys without a balanced and versatile group. With so many guilds in one place, finding teammates to fulfill specific roles was as simple as visiting the relevant institution.

The organizations themselves also greatly benefited from their close proximity in various ways, most notable of which were the regular cross-guild training exercises. It was important for rookie adventurers to be knowledgeable about the features and capabilities of other Jobs and learn how to best synergize others' abilities with their own. This seemed only natural, but no other society placed as much importance on teamwork and cooperation as the elves.

This group-oriented mindset was something of a symptom of the collectivist culture that had reigned in the Ishigar Republic since the time of the ancient and defunct Elven Dominion. It was a stark contrast to the residents of the Empire, who put a much greater emphasis on individualism. Their nation was a meritocracy, where personal strength and achievements were far more important than lineage or association. A place where even a no-named commoner could one day be crowned Emperor if their contributions were great enough. Or at least that was what the 'Imperial Dream' promised.

The problem with this mindset, at least from the elves' perspective, was that it promoted recklessness, greed, and corruption—all of which were rampant

issues within the Empire. The major upside of that competitive environment, which was to weed out the weak and nurture the strong, was not something elven society would benefit from. Birth rates in the Republic were notably lower than those in the Empire, so the predominantly elven population could not afford to risk the lives of their youngsters. Putting things bluntly, they had to make the most of what they had.

As such, the training offered by Republic-based guilds was far more extensive and better supervised than that of other nations. This meant it was also significantly more expensive and time consuming. This was deemed an acceptable drawback since, when compared to other countries on the continent, a much larger proportion of the Republic's rookie adventurers survived past Level 25. Outsiders would call this coddling, though the locals liked to think of it as giving everyone the ability to be useful to society.

This was also the reason why a group of ten men and women were lined up in a yard outside the Consortium building. The dirt beneath their feet was completely devoid of vegetation, as it had been walked on by so many pairs of legs that the dry ground had become akin to sand. All of them waited patiently for their Ranger instructor to arrive, and passed the time chatting idly.

Well, except for one cat-eared beastkin girl that sat on the ground and breathing heavily with sweat running down her forehead.

"You ran all the way here again, didn't you?" Lia loomed over her with a stern tone. "You still would've been made to run a marathon again if Faehorn wasn't running late himself."

"Haah, haah, haah, please don't, haah, tell him!" Keira pleaded between gasps for air.

"I won't, but you seriously need to start waking up earlier!"

"I did! Haah, haah, I woke up right before dawn! It's just that, haah, I had dropped one of my rings last night and, haah, spent way too long looking for it!"

The catgirl presented the back of her right hand to Lia, showing off the trio of plain-looking steel rings on her third, fourth and fifth finger.

“Those things? Come to think of it, you always have those on, don’t you? Are they enchanted or something?”

“Yeah, they have some weak magic on them, haah, but that’s not why I’m wearing them. Haah, haah, phew…” the catgirl stabilized her breathing. “They’re mementos from back home, so I’d never forgive myself if I lost them.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. They’re very precious to me.”

Keira smiled softly, gently rubbing the sentimental jewelry with her other hand. Lia wanted to ask what the story behind them was, but changed her mind when she saw her friend’s happy expression. She’d probably ask eventually, but right now was neither the time nor the place for what she imagined would be a difficult subject.

“I can see why. They suit you quite well in my opinion.”

What the elf did instead was offer a pleasant compliment.

“Thanks. Rowie complained about them at first though,” Keira pouted slightly.

“Rowie? Oh, your girlf- *partner*, right?”

“Yeah. She said they felt weird at first, but she’s gotten used to them by now.”

“Felt weird? What’s that supposed to- No! Never mind! I don’t need to know!”

The slightly blushing elf shook her head rather wildly in an effort to disperse the naughty and inappropriate image in her mind.

“That’s not what I meant,” Keira protested. “I mean when we hold hands and interlink our fingers.”

“Right! I knew that! That was definitely the wholesome and not-at-all-lewd thought I had just now!”

“I mean, of course I’d take them off for that other thing,” the redhead continued. “The last thing I need is to have one slip off and get lost inside-”

“Keira!”

“TMI?”

“TMI.”

Lia sighed in the awkward silence that ensued. Keira was a bit slow to warm up to her at first, but now that she had she didn’t seem to know when to draw the line when talking about her personal life. She had only just immigrated here from the Empire, so she had yet to get used to the fact that the elves of the Republic were usually a lot more prudish. It was a simple case of culture shock. Lia realized this when the latter thoughtlessly revealed she was romantically involved with another woman during yesterday’s cart ride. She then offered to help the redhead adjust to her new home by letting Keira know whenever she was sharing ‘too much information,’ or TMI for short.

“Alright everyone, sorry for the delay!”

Faehorn’s clear voice rang out from behind them, prompting the entire Ranger class to stand at attention. He briskly walked up to the front of the group and stood there with his arms crossed while carefully looking over each and every student. This much was his normal routine, but something was clearly off today, and not just because he was late. Instead of his impressive-looking scale armor, he wore what could only be described as a parade uniform. It consisted of a long, dark-green overcoat, fresh-pressed black trousers and black boots that were polished to a mirror-like finish.

He uncrossed his arms, put them behind his back and walked up to Keira, who reflexively stiffened up.

“Miss Morgana. I’ve given your stamina situation a lot of thought, and I’ve come up with a good solution.”

Despair welled up in the catgirl’s eyes at those words.

“Relax, I’m not making you run forty kilometers a day. Not yet, at least.”

She almost let out a sigh of relief, but it got stuck in her throat upon hearing those last few words.

“What’s your Ranger Level?” he asked matter-of-factly.

“Fourteen, mister Faehorn,” she responded stiffly.

“Okay, when you get to Level 20, I urge you to get the Fleet Footed Skill. It will help increase your overall stamina and reduce its consumption when you run or sprint. You’ll need to train up its Proficiency Level quite a bit, which is where those forty kilometers a day come in.

“Uh… D-do I have a choice?”

“Of course. You can do whatever you want, or you can graduate from my class. That decision is all yours.”

“… Understood, mister Faehorn, sir,” she responded, her shoulders drooping with disappointment.

It wasn’t much of a choice when considering that passing this training course was a mandatory prerequisite if one hoped to become a full member of the Hidden Arrow guild.

“Hahaha,” Faehorn chuckled. “Don’t you worry, kiddo. I’ll make a proper Ranger out of you yet.”

He walked to the front of the class while they tried to stifle their giggling.

“Now then. Today we’ll be having a special field trip!” he announced in a loud voice. “We’ll be heading towards the amphitheater to watch a few fights! The guild has kindly sponsored the tickets, so be grateful!”

Everyone present gave the instructor a strange look. They had guessed they wouldn’t have another hunting expedition given Faehorn’s uncharacteristic tardiness and formal attire, but none of them expected something like this. They clearly had questions, though it was the black-haired power-leveler that was the first to raise his hand.

“Yes, what is it Miller?” Faehorn asked in response.

“Sir, I fail to see how this will be beneficial to us.”

“‘Fail to see,’ huh? Interesting choice of words, Miller! The fighter we’ll be watching is someone who I believe to be the natural enemy of us Rangers, and a rather unique one at that! Your first assignment for the day will be to closely study her fighting style and think up of any and all countermeasures!”

It would seem to be an observational and mental exercise, rather than a physical one. A good scout needed to be able to quickly analyze a situation, so this sort of lesson had to come sooner or later. The format was a bit unorthodox, but none of the students were about to complain about getting free tickets to a fight.

“It’s not just us!” Faehorn continued. “A group of Warriors from the Knights of Elena and several Paladins from the Blessed of Nyrie will be joining us, so I expect each and every one of you to be on your best behavior!”

It suddenly made sense why the instructor was wearing that stiff-looking uniform. It was a well-known fact that he had something of a friendly rivalry with one of the Knights’ instructors, a dwarf called Hilda. The two of them were known to constantly compete and try to one-up each other through their students. ‘That old bat,’ as he called her, would definitely try to show off in some way during this outing, so he didn’t want to feel left behind. Well, that and marching an armed group of people through the city was probably a bad idea.

Faehorn organized his class and made them leave their weapons and armor behind at the Hidden Arrow’s guild offices. They set out in whatever casual clothes they had with them, but still wore the dark green tunic that bore the image of a downward-pointing arrowhead on each shoulder. They met up with a group of fourteen other rookie adventurers that were similarly dressed in their respective guild’s uniform.

Nine of them wore navy blue tunics with the image of a stone tower on their chests, which marked them as the Warriors they were told about. They were also the most diverse group present, with five dwarves and three humans among their ranks. The only elf in the group was a woman-shaped battering ram that was well over two meters tall.

The tunics of the remaining five were a dull yellow, their shoulder patches bearing the image of a dark brown sickle—one of the symbols commonly associated with the goddess Nyrie. These were, by process of elimination, the religious ones that Faehorn mentioned. All of them were elves, which was something they had in common with the Ranger troupe. Well, so long as one ignored the highly conspicuous crimson-haired, tan-skinned, cat-eared-and-tailed girl that smiled dumbly for no good reason.

Two people, likely their instructors, stood off to the side. One was a tall, well-built male elf that wore a uniform similar to Faehorn's, only dyed in the colors of the Blessed of Nyrie. The other was a gray-haired and wrinkled dwarf woman in thick, full-plate armor with a blue sash draped across her shoulder. She was also holding a massive two-handed axe that, while certainly imposing and intimidating, seemed much too large for a woman of her stature to wield efficiently.

The two dozen trainees greeted each other and exchanged pleasantries. The students seemed to get along with each other for the most part, unlike their teachers. Faehorn and Hilda had already gotten into an argument regarding the dwarf being armed almost literally to the teeth. The Ranger argued that there was no need to gear up so much for a peaceful outing, while the dwarf remained adamant that she didn't want to wear the 'pansy-ass dress-coat' she was supposed to. The Paladin instructor by the name of Lichter had to intervene and put an end to their squabble before the group could set out.

The teachers then led the students through the elven capital's street. The procession attracted quite a bit of attention, though that was mostly because of the dwarf in the noisy, clanging armor at the front and the exotic sight of a cat-eared beastkin towards the rear. Keira spotted a rather drastic change in her surroundings at one point, as the wooden buildings with red-tiled roofs suddenly gave way to ones made out of stone or clay bricks. The people around the street were also considerably shorter.

This neighborhood was unofficially known as Azurvale's Stone District. Keira had never been there before, so she looked around curiously at the dwarves and gnomes milling about the place. There were also a fair bit more humans here than in her own neighborhood, and she even saw a short, dog-eared beastkin lugging a heavy barrel strapped to his back. It was a

much noisier part of the city than the ones she had been to before, and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The group of adventurers arrived at the amphitheater. It was a large, unroofed, oval-shaped stone building managed by the local community. Faehorn, Hilda and Lichter spoke briefly with some fancily-dressed dwarven officials, after which they and the students were escorted inside. They were seated at a VIP box that provided an excellent, front-row view of the circular, dirt-covered arena below. The tiered stone seats surrounding it gave off the strange impression of a gigantic staircase, and already had people filling them.

"Wow, so many people!" exclaimed Keira after taking her seat.

"This place was built to house up to ten thousand spectators, you know," Lia explained as she sat next to her. "Although I don't think they usually fill up this much…"

In fact, judging from the amount of people that kept pouring in, the venue might actually be slightly over capacity.

"Probably because of the fighter we're here to see," a voice from behind chimed in.

Keira jumped slightly in her seat due to the unexpected third party. She turned around to see that the only elven Warrior in the group, the giantess that had introduced herself as Lola, was sitting directly behind her. She didn't look particularly well-muscled or sturdily built, though. She had the same overall slender proportions that elf women were known for aside from her hips, thighs and shoulders, which were noticeably wider than usual. Both her hair and her eyes were pitch-black, much like that guy called Miller in Keira's class.

"You know something about this mystery fighter, Lola?" the redhead asked after a brief moment.

"Oh, yeah. Truth be told, I've already seen her fight before. She's unpredictable, vicious, and not alright in the head."

"Ugh," Lia groaned. "She's not one of those violent convicts you hear about, right?"

“Nah, she’s not. I hear she’s actually really nice outside the arena, and a skilled artisan besides.”

“What? You sure this is the same person?”

“You’ll see for yourself soon enough. It’s already starting.”

The girls turned their attention towards the arena. A clean-shaven dwarf in an eye-catching purple suit and top hat had walked out of one of the side passages and stood in the middle of the dirt pit.

“Ladies and gentlemen!”

His magically amplified voice boomed throughout the arena, allowing even the people in the far back rows to hear him clearly.

“Welcome to today’s performance! We have another trio of blood-curling and hair-raising fights for your enjoyment!”

The crowd let out a huge cheer. Even those who had no idea what was going on, like Lia and Keira, were excited.

“So, without further ado, let me present the first match! Innn this corner, we have a quartet of hardened criminals! These men have been caught and found guilty of many crimes in the wake of the mysterious Sandman dismantling their underground operation!”

Four grim-faced dwarves in prisoner’s rags entered the ring under armed guard while the crowd booed and jeered at them.

“Hey Lia,” half-shouted Keira, trying to make herself heard over the noisy audience. “What’s with the Sandman thing?! Why do they call him that?!”

She’d been curious about it for a while now, but hadn’t really gotten a good chance to ask.

“It’s from an old elven myth!” the elf replied in a similarly loud tone. “It says the Sandman roams the night, punishing the wicked by kidnapping them and burying them alive in a pit of sand!”

“Is he real?!”

“Nah! Just a silly story parents use to scare their unruly children!”

It would appear that the mysterious individual or group that had been making criminals disappear was given the name of a bogeyman from elven folklore. Not that the residents genuinely believed the actual Sandman was responsible, it was just that many of them found it oddly fitting.

“Their crimes have been weighed and judged in a fair and just trial,” the announcer continued, “and their lives have been declared forfeit in recognition of their numerous sins! However! These four have demanded to fight for their right to live within the arena, as begets ancient dwarven custom! And Azurvale’s wise judges have seen it fit to honor our people’s heritage and allow them this chance! If they best their opponent in honorable combat, then their sentences will be lessened! If not, then justice will have been served!”

The crowd, which seemed half-divided between elves and non-elves, gave a noisy, uncertain murmur. It would appear they had mixed feelings about this situation. Some of them wondered if the ring of honor was really a place for such people, while others questioned whether these scumbags were deserving of another chance in the first place. There were also those who applauded the judges for respecting one of the major subcultures that made up Azurvale and the Republic as a whole.

“But!” shouted the announcer. “Do they stand a chance against… *her*?!”

The crowd suddenly went silent with anticipation. The Consortium students were also on edge, as only a few of them had had the privilege of seeing this individual in person before.

“You know her! And I know her! She crashed onto the scene like a storm of swearing, smashing and smiling! Barely a week since her first appearance and already eleven consecutive victories! Please welcome back the executioner who volunteered to undertake this grim and righteous task! The one! The only! The Rust! Blood! Juggernaaaaaaaaut!”

The spectators exploded in cheers as the gladiator that most of them had come to see walked out onto the field from the entrance directly opposite the quartet of criminals.

She sported a custom top that hung from one shoulder, concealing her well-rounded breasts and little else. Her waist had two separate belts wrapped

around it, each holding a heavy leather pouch. A pair of baggy shorts hung down to her steel knee pads. She had a tool-carrying bracelet on her right forearm, a cursed shield permanently affixed to her left, and both hands firmly held a massive blood-stained wrench. Her metal hair was forever styled into a pair of voluminous pigtails, and her shiny face sported a disturbing, wide smile with a strange look in her eyes. Her skin, once made of polished steel, had been upgraded into series of lustrous, almost blindingly white mithril plates after her first real Rank Up, much to her Hero's delight.

"Haah haaaaaaa!"

Fizzy raised a loud cheer of her own as she waved her signature weapon around. Nothing made the metallic woman feel alive like such moments. Thousands of people's eyes were fixed on her new-and-improved frame, feeding the inherent narcissism found in all golems. Not only did she get to show off, but she also got to please Boxxy by earning fight money. She was currently the only one of the shapeshifter's minions that actually enjoyed her assignment.

The guards undid the shackles of their prisoners and left a collection of basic steel weapons at their feet. They and the announcer then retreated to the sides of the arena, as Fizzy carefully sized them up. Two of them armed themselves with heavy, two-handed warhammers, the third with a pair of smaller maces and the last one picked up a plain-looking staff. According to what Fizzy had been told beforehand, these guys were a pair of Warriors, a Rogue and a Pyromancer, respectively. A few tense minutes passed as the two sides sized each other up and prepared. Once they were ready, they took their starting positions some twenty meters apart, as was tradition.

"Our combatants are in position!" declared the announcer. "Let the match… Begin!"

He barely even finished saying the words when Fizzy shot out from her position. She used her Armored Charge to smash shield-first into one of the Warriors with enough force to send him flying backwards. He bounced twice, tumbled head over heels and slammed into the far wall with a heavy thud. Although he didn't lose his life outright, he broke a shoulder and several ribs.

Fizzy then proceeded to swing her heavy wrench sideways, hitting the stupefied Rogue in his thigh. There was an unpleasant cracking noise, followed by a piercing scream as the leg bent in a completely unnatural way. The Pyromancer backed off and started throwing Fireballs at her. Fizzy blocked them all with her shield, deflecting most of the roaring flames. This left her wide open to attacks from the rear. Something the other mace-wielder took advantage of as he landed a direct blow on the back of her metal skull.

The golem's head rang out like a gong, yet she barely suffered even fifty points of damage. Rather than reeling or recoiling from the heavy strike, she instead returned the blow with a one-handed swing of her own weapon. The Warrior tried to block the attack with the haft of his hammer, but Fizzy's wrench snapped the steel handle in half as if it were a twig. The business end of her oversized tool buried itself into his side, causing him to keel over and blackout briefly from the pain. She then swung the improvised weapon once more and flung it at the Pyromancer's head. The dwarf just barely managed to avoid the hunk of enchanted steel hurtling towards his face by flinging himself to the side.

He was just about to get up from his precarious position when he felt a sharp, stabbing pain in his shoulder. Fizzy had run up to him while he was dodging her attack and skewered him with the broken handle of his friend's weapon. She then stepped on his back, pinning him under her massive weight. She withdrew the jagged metal rod then used it to repeatedly stab into his fleshy bits. Her unflinching, toothy smile grew wider as his blood gushed all over her. There was no technique, accuracy or finesse to this act. Her movements were repetitive and forceful, like a Miner trying to make a stubborn stone yield beneath their pick.

And then Fizzy did something that no merciful being would ever consider.

"Holy Light!"

She used her divine magic to heal his wounds. And then continued stabbing him. She kept alternating between healing and violence, keeping him on the edge of death for what felt like hours, but was actually closer to a few minutes. The other three dwarves had more or less regained their footing,

but the horrifying sight of their comrade kicking, screaming and literally begging to die had made them freeze with fear.

The elven officials that condemned them knew full well that this fight would not be anything even remotely close to fair. The only reason they agreed to this trial-by-combat was because they were certain it would turn into a drawn-out public execution rather than a quick beheading. Justice would still be served, but the bloody spectacle would no doubt greatly appease the citizens of the Stone District who had suffered most from this particular cartel. The golem herself was more than happy to comply with their wishes, making this a win-win-win for those involved.

Well, aside from the prisoners themselves, but society had already deemed them deserving of whatever fate the psychotic Paladin had in store for them.

By the time the Pyromancer finally passed away, Fizzy was covered head-to-toe in his blood. Both the audience and her opponents watched in silent shock as she stood up from the corpse and looked over the remaining survivors. She held a hand in the direction of her fallen wrench and activated her Magnetize Skill. The heavy steel tool vibrated, then leapt into the air and landed in her waiting, open palm. She pointed the weapon towards one of the dwarves at random.

“Eeny…”

Then to the next.

“Meeny…”

Then to the third.

“Miney…”

Back to the first.

“Die.”

It took her less than ten minutes to finish administering justice on behalf of the city’s authority. The three dwarves put up a desperate struggle, but they had no chance. The only reason they lasted as long as they did was because Fizzy was having fun playing with the hapless meatbags and gloating over their mangled bodies. When the last criminal died by having his body

pummeled into goop, she raised her blood-and-brains-soaked weapon above her head and showed the most disturbing grin yet.

And then, of all things, she started singing.

“Oh, do you know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man? Do you know the muffin man that lives inside my head?”

It was an upbeat, cheerful tune that seemed to well up from her very soul and was completely out of place. She swayed her entire upper body back in forth in rhythm with her words. And, much to the surprise of the entire stupefied Ranger class, a large portion of the crowd, including Lola, sang back to her with an equally cheery tone.

“Oh, yes we know the muffin man, the muffin man, the muffin man! Now we know the muffin man that lives inside your head!”

The golem repeated her first verse, while the crowd once again replied with the second. The odd exchange repeated itself a third and final time, by which point even those who had no idea what was going on ended up singing along. It was as if everybody forgot there were a number of bloodied and mangled corpses strewn around her. The bizarre spectacle finished with a round of applause, and Fizzy’s manic smile was replaced with a much calmer, sweeter one.

“Stay safe out there!”

She shouted her goodbyes while walking off the ‘stage’ and waving back at the still-cheering audience. The announcer came out afterwards, stating there would be a brief intermission while they cleaned up and fixed the arena.

“What… just happened?” Lia asked in disbelief.

“Oh, she always sings that song after a fight,” explained Lola.

“But… why?”

“Dunno. It’s good fun, though. Helps calm down the troubled heart.”

“Now that you mention it, I do feel a lot less on edge. Huh? Keira, you okay?”

The catgirl, who had been staring wide-eyed and open-mouthed at the spectacle, wiped the drool from the corner of her mouth. She regained a bit of composure and gave her green-haired friend a weak smile and an embarrassed laugh.

“Hahaha, sorry, I got a bit too into it. I mean, I could really go for a muffin right now.”

“Yeah, me too, actually,” Lia said with a chuckle as Lola nodded in agreement.

“I hope you people were watching carefully!” Faehorn shouted, his voice was clearly audible over the riled-up crowd. “Because you’ll be sparring against her later this afternoon!”

Part Eight

Fizzy followed after Boxxy while fidgeting slightly. It was the first time in four days since they'd met face to face, so she was a bit nervous. The spider-chest was currently leading her towards the newly created Dryad's Domain hidden within a certain hylt tree. However, it still lacked a good entry point, so they had to make their way there through the sewer. Xera and Kora had already mapped out the route so it wasn't like they would get lost, but it was still a long trip.

"Di-did I do good, Boxxy?" the golem finally asked the question that had been on her mind.

"Yeah, you did okay."

"I'm glad. I didn't get a chance to tell you in advance, so I was a bit unprepared."

The offer to assist a bunch of guilds with their training exercises for a day was a bit sudden, but she accepted it, because her orders were to make nice with the locals. The extra paycheck was good to have as well. The real issue is that she failed to realize that one of the guilds would be the Hidden Arrow, the one Boxxy was attending, until it was too late to let it know.

"I just… I wasn't sure how you'd react so-"

"I said it was okay," the shapeshifter insisted. "You didn't treat me any differently, so they don't seem to suspect a thing. It was a stupid exercise anyway."

It was a total farce in Boxxy's opinion, although Faehorn seemed rather pleased with himself at the results. The 'spar' that the old elf had told them about turned into nothing but a glorified game of tag, whereby the unarmed golem had to chase down and capture her opponent. All of them were caught within a minute, regardless of how they tried to run or jump around the Consortium's training grounds. The bow-wielding Ranger students also found themselves completely unable to hit the small target that rapidly changed direction and could close the distance between them in an instant.

Even if one of them managed to get a lucky shot in, the arrow would just bounce harmlessly off her skin.

Her lustrous, flawless, sparkling mithril skin.

“So shiny…” the monster mumbled, causing Fizzy to squirm a little in delight.

She knew that Boxxy was actively probing her insides, marveling at the tough-yet-light metal called ‘white gold.’ Having the attention of thousands of people felt good, great even. However, that couldn’t compare to being laid bare to the extreme before her Hero. It was a sensation that felt positively divine.

“Y-your acting was way too good though,” she said after a few more minutes of trudging through sewer tunnels. “I wouldn’t have realized which one of those meatbags was you, if you hadn’t told me in advance. Even then, I almost couldn’t believe it. It was downright freaky.”

“I’ll take it as a compliment,” Boxxy responded in high spirits. “My performance still needs work, though.”

The monster had practiced intensively with Snack during its weeklong trip from the Republic’s southern border to its capital. As both a doppelganger and a mimic, it learned best through imitating the actions of others, so it had the succubus take on various forms and guises as she interacted with various people. This allowed Boxxy to rapidly pick up what sort of behavior and mannerisms were and weren’t accepted in a civilized society. The problem is its knowledge essentially boiled down to a set of rules that could be summed up as ‘when *that* happens, to *this*.’ It struggled to improvise, and as such came off as awkward and weird when confronted with an unfamiliar social scenario. Those experiences also helped it realize the most important thing when trying to convince the enlightened that it not, in fact, a monster that would eat them whole in a heartbeat.

People, as Boxxy learned, were inherently flawed. They had concerns and worries, things they liked and disliked, motivations that drove them to seek specific goals and fears that made them act in illogical and irrational ways. A real person would be able to do certain things naturally, but would perform poorly at others for seemingly no reason other than ‘they just

weren't good at it.' They would then shrug and move on with their lives rather than trying to correct what they perceived as an immutable flaw. They also had strong opinions on certain topics, which were not always formed based on facts or logic. Opinions that they would remain firmly rooted in even after they had been shown objective and undeniable proof that their beliefs were quite false.

These were, for the most part, foreign concepts to a thoroughly inhuman and instinct-driven monster like Boxxy. A genuine enlightened personality, as it turned out, was a complex mesh of such quirks and oddities, both 'good' and 'bad.' This meant that whatever public persona the monster chose would invariably appeal to a certain type of people, but infuriate and annoy others. The shapeshifter had unwittingly stumbled onto one of the biggest hurdles that plagued every artist and performer—it was impossible to please everyone.

The often-overlooked flip side was that it was impossible for any person to feel completely happy every second of every day. Anyone who suggested or advocated otherwise was either dishonest or not right in the head. This notion was something Boxxy easily agreed with. Its main problem with this nugget of wisdom was that it was born without a face. It was a complex body part with a ridiculous number of muscles and nerves that could be arranged in countless expressions that differed in subtle, yet perceivable ways.

Hence why much of Xera's acting classes had been focused on the face in particular. Her master had been embarrassingly terrible at keeping its true intentions and emotions from floating onto whatever face it wore. Ranking Up into a doppelganger helped tremendously in that regard, though dozens of hours were still devoted to explaining which expressions were appropriate to which situations. It was almost a science in and of itself, and something Boxxy still struggled with. Thankfully, the appearance it had chosen for its public persona was an attractive and non-threatening one. This, combined with its rather substantial Charisma (CHR) Attribute, made its stiff and awkward moments seem endearing rather than creepy.

None of that was relevant down here in the sewer, which was why it walked around in the spider-chest form it was most comfortable with.

“Uh… Are you sure we’re headed the right way?” Fizzy asked while following Boxxy through the old sewers. “I’m pretty sure we made six consecutive right turns just now.”

“The ground is actually slanted at a barely noticeable angle,” the shapeshifter casually revealed. “You probably don’t feel it, but we’ve been going up a spiral for a while.”

The shapeshifter felt rather proud of itself for delegating the task of mapping out these labyrinthine passageways to its familiars. There were a million other things it would rather do than skulk around these tunnels for days on end. This wasn’t because they were damp, dark, and claustrophobic. It actually liked those parts. However, there was nothing to be found down there that could be considered shiny or tasty, literally or metaphorically.

“I hope you don’t expect me to take the same route every time,” the golem grumbled. “I don’t even want to think what that brown stuff we’re walking on is.”

Though personal hygiene was hardly a worry for her, it would not befit her glorious frame to be sullied with such filth. She was also glad to be spared the disgusting sensations and odors that normally accompanied a trek through the sewers.

“It’s just temporary,” Boxxy explained. “I’ll figure out another entrance eventually, but until then you need to memorize this path so you can come and go freely.”

This was also the reason why it hadn’t thrown Fizzy into its Storage and transported both of them into the newly established dungeon with the Transfamiliar Spell.

“Yeah, okay, good plan,” the construct agreed. “Is- Is it much farther, though?”

“No, we’re practically here.”

A half minute and a few turned corners later, and the shapeshifting box brought Fizzy before the giant, half-eaten tree root that Xera and Kora had found the night before.

“Oh, is that it?” the golem exclaimed.

“That’s it. I’ll go in first, you climb in after me.”

Boxxy and its devout follower went into the tree root and started clambering up the cramped tunnel. It took them another few minutes, but they eventually made it out of the timber tunnel and into the former termite nest.

[You have entered the Dryad’s Domain.]
[An intruder has entered your dungeon.]

“… Oh, right.”

Boxxy only just now realized that, although its familiars were considered extensions of itself, Fizzy wasn’t. She was a completely separate entity, and was not welcomed into the dungeon with open arms. This meant that the newly appointed dungeon master would probably not like her presence here.

“Who dares?!”

And indeed, the dryad in question practically leapt out of the nearby bark-covered wall, her face twisted with anger as if she were ready to strangle someone. She then saw Boxxy, which made her expression soften considerably.

“Milord,” she greeted it with a deep bow. “‘Tis good to see thou art in good health.”

“Hey, Ambrosia,” it replied. “I see the dungeon is growing steadily.”

“‘Tis so, milord. It hath almost completely encompassed this hollow crevice within mine body. Both the Surveillance Net and thy servants have been extremely effective in finding and culling the vile vermin that have inhabited mine bark for millennia. ‘Tis a most refreshing thing.”

“Glad to be of help.”

The former mimic had more or less known about her exploits since it had been tracking things remotely through both its familiars and the Surveillance Net. It had also managed to acquire the Butcher of Termites Perk in the meantime, meaning its familiars had slain over five thousand of

the things since yesterday. Its Warlock Job Levels had barely progressed though. Not only were these opponents far too weak, but killing them by proxy while it was far away meant that whatever little XP it had gotten was greatly diminished. Thinking back on the big boom at Monotal, it probably would have gotten a lot more Levels if it was closer to the explosion. Then again, there was a good chance it wouldn't have survived the event if it had done that. All in all, it thought it had handled that situation in the best way possible.

"Milord, forgive mine manners, but what is this accursed being thou had brought into the Dryad's Domain?"

The dryad pointed rudely at the gnome-shaped golem, clearly disapproving of her being here.

"I'm with Boxxy. Got a problem with that?" Fizzy shot back with equal hostility.

"Thou art tainted with foul magic, and do not belong in this sacred place."

It would seem the dryad was able to sense the curse permeating through the golem's body. It wasn't just the shut-in tree lady that took offense to Fizzy's condition. Her circumstances had naturally caused quite a stir among the adventurer community, as it was an extremely curious and exceptional case. The golem herself was actually a bit worried that people who didn't know how to mind their business would forcefully try to dispel the curse from her. However, she later found out that the curse was so deeply ingrained within her body, that it would be impossible to remove it through conventional means. Her transformation had also been quite permanent and irreversible. Not even separating her cursed gauntlet from the rest of her would not to return her to the flesh she so willingly and eagerly threw away.

This was good news for the former gnome. Because while she liked her steel body, she absolutely loved her new-and-improved mithril self. The Rank Up had finished attuning her enlightened mind to her monstrous body, and in doing so allowed her to gain full control of her instincts and urges. In essence, this meant she no longer involuntarily stripped. She still took off her clothes in public sometimes, but that was a result of her own conscious decision, rather than some strange reflex. This change also meant she

became considerably more aggressive, especially towards people who looked down on her.

“We’ll see how sacred it is when I whittle it down to a stick and shove it up your ass!”

“Thou shalt regret-”

“That’s enough!”

Boxxy’s commanding, ear-piercing shout caused both monsters to immediately cease their petty squabble. It made it blatantly clear to both women that it would not tolerate this sort of pointless squabbling.

“Fizzy, you’re technically an intruder here, so don’t antagonize my dungeon master.”

“Yes, Boxxy. Sorry, Boxxy.”

“And Ambrosia, this is Fizzy. She is one of my servants, so you will treat and address her with the same respect you show me. Are we clear?”

“Yes, milord. This one apologizes for her rude words. Milady, Fizzy.”

The dryad gave a deep and respectful bow, as if her snide attitude were a fleeting dream.

“Doth milord and milady have any other use of me?”

“Not right now.”

“Uhm… No, I’m good…”

“Then I shall return to attending to milord’s other servants.”

The plant-lady disappeared into the ground with another polite bow.

“Wow!” exclaimed Fizzy. “So, this is what a core does to people, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Boxxy confirmed nonchalantly.

A dungeon core did not control the mind of monsters bound to its service, not really. What it did was twist their instincts and perceptions so that those creatures would revere the dungeon itself to the point of fanaticism. as the dungeon owner, Boxxy would therefore be considered an absolute and infallible being whose words and wishes were treated as law by those in the

core's service. Conversely, any 'outsiders' would be treated as unforgivable enemies. The shapeshifting chest had experienced this enthrallment firsthand, so it knew just how potent it was.

That said, it was rather surprising just how quickly this ancient-yet-naive dryad became ensnared by it. She almost instantly recognized Boxxy as the supreme authority within her own body and never questioned a single thing that it or its familiars did. This was good, because the doppelganger honestly couldn't trust her, nor did it want to be on hostile terms with her. Although the dungeon core's Basic Appraisal of the dryad was unable to discern her Skills and Attributes, what it did reveal still told a rather terrifying story.

According to the Job List on her Status, Ambrosia was a Level 50 Primordial Spirit, Level 50 Plant Spirit, Level 100 Dryad and Level 100 Hamadryad. Over thirty thousand years old and with a staggering total Level of 300, she had clearly reached the zenith of her evolutionary path. Most terrifying of all was her literally infinite HP. Her womanly body was not only ageless, but outright indestructible so long as her tree was in good health and she remained in close proximity to it. And yet, despite all that, she was strangely powerless in the face of some termites. It would seem even Ambrosia, a being that could rightfully be called a demigod, had some things she could not deal with. A harsh truth that applied to all things, probably even the actual Gods themselves.

As for Boxxy, its biggest concern at the moment was to check on the dungeon.

"Dungeon Management."

[Dungeon Management]
[Core ID # PT-5484-BM]
Active (Dryad's Domain)
Owned by Boxxy T. Morningwood
Managed by Ambrosia
96% Integrity
20,000/20,000 MP (+0/sec)

[Basic Functions]
Dungeon Expansion – Active
Item Allocation – Disabled
Mana Collection – Active
Monster Spawner – Disabled
Surveillance Net – Active

[Advanced Features]
Guardian Assignment – Ready
Nexus Access – Ready
Prison Management – Ready
Terrain Sculpting – Ready
Trap Construction – Ready

Not much had changed since yesterday, other than the Integrity had improved a little and the Mana Collection had auto-regulated itself to prevent the core from overloading. The dungeon's ever-expanding sphere of influence had at one point allowed the core to absorb nearly 120 MP per second from the surrounding area. Although that seemed a lot, it really wasn't in relation to how much upkeep the various modules and functions required.

Regulating the Monster Spawner, for example, would demand a minimum of 30 MP per second in order to perform its function to the fullest. It wasn't needed at that time, though. Nor was it likely to be needed in the future. After all, the only monsters that could appear within this tree's inner environment were weak, low-Level fodder at best. Things like goblins, trolls, kobolds, gnolls, spiders, serpents, slimes, and so on. Having a dryad as a dungeon master also allowed the creation of some more advanced monster types, such as select species of sentient plants and giant insects. The problem was that none of these were shiny, tasty, or even remotely useful.

Long story short, the Monster Spawner was far too costly for how little benefit it offered Boxxy. The Surveillance Net wasn't necessarily all that useful either, but at least it had a had an almost insignificant upkeep. The Dungeon Expansion and Mana Collection functions, on the other hand,

were quite vital to the dungeon's operations. Their menus were mainly used for regulating them, rather than turning them off or on.

However, it was the dungeon's Advanced Features that were the most taxing ones. For instance, Terrain Sculpting and Nexus Access could, in theory, completely drain the core's MP reserves in a matter of seconds. Each trap, guardian or prisoner being cared for by the core's other Advanced Features would demand a sizeable upkeep of their own. That was why Boxxy had to make sure this didn't strain this place too hard. Not because it was worried about draining the place, but because it was wary of infuriating the 'landlady.'

Even if the brainwashing on Ambrosia appeared to be working as intended, it didn't want to push its luck and deprive her of too much sustenance. A monster driven to starvation would definitely try to break free from its dungeon, as not even the core could completely suppress its survival instincts. It was precisely what led to Boxxy breaking free of its own birthplace, after all. The shapeshifter therefore decided its dungeon would only take as much as was necessary, lest the dryad suddenly decide her new 'residents' were actually parasites.

And there were certain things that Boxxy planned to do with this dungeon, starting with providing Fizzy with both a place to stay and a way for her to move around.

"Terrain Sculpting!" it chanted.

Countless bright blue lines suddenly appeared on the wooden surface of the surrounding cavern, almost as if someone had covered the walls and floor with a net of light. It was something only the one actively using the Terrain Sculpting tool could see, so golem's only reaction was a mildly puzzled look at Boxxy. The shapeshifter ignored her and walked over to a good-looking spot in the ground and made a gesture with a tentacle, as if lifting something off the ground. Part of the intangible wire mesh suddenly jumped in response, which was PASSIVE followed by creaking and rumbling sounds as the wooden surface twisted itself to conform to the new shape. It took only a second to form a gigantic pillar of wood that was over 15 meters tall.

“Whoa! That’s pretty cool!” Fizzy exclaimed as she watched the bark twist and deform.

Boxxy turned its attention towards the shiny paladin and realized that the mesh of illusory lines was tinged red rather than blue. It would appear that the dungeon core was unwilling to perform terrain changes if there was an intruder within ten meters, probably as some sort of failsafe mechanism. That crystal ball had a lot of those to make sure that the one using it didn’t accidentally cause a calamity. In fact, it seemed practically impossible for the ex-mimic to overload the core with mana even if it wanted to. The God of Causality must have had some deeper understanding of this enigmatic mechanism to be able to bypass all those safety measures.

“Fizzy, stand back,” it ordered, “I have to build a thing.”

“Y-yes, Boxxy. Whatever you say, Boxxy!”

The offending golem walked further away, allowing Boxxy to finish. It extended the wooden pillar further upward, steadily draining away thousands of the core’s MP reserves. The Mana Collection automatically kicked into high gear and began replenishing them at a rate of 135.6 MP per second. Branch-like platforms grew out of the impossibly tall wooden pillar, attaching it to the surrounding caves, plateaus and walls. These would serve to keep it from collapsing under its own weight, and to provide access to those parts of the dungeon. The massive wooden pole was then steadily turned into a grand circular staircase. Boxxy and Fizzy started climbing it as the monster made adjustments as it saw fit.

[Ambrosia: Milord! What art thou doing down there?!]

A message from the dryad suddenly popped into the shapeshifter’s consciousness. This was a communication function of the Surveillance Net that allowed notable individuals within the dungeon to exchange messages in the form of text. It wasn’t quite as convenient as the telepathic link between a Warlock and their familiar, but it was very useful nonetheless. It seemed to consume a negligible amount of MP and, as far Boxxy could tell, had infinite range. The monster briefly wondered why the dryad used this instead of showing up in person, but it didn’t really matter much.

[Boxxy: I’m just making your insides a bit more accessible. Is it unpleasant?]
[Ambrosia: Nay, though it doth tickle verily!]
[Boxxy: I’ll be done soon, so please bear with it.]
[Ambrosia: Understood, milord.]

Boxxy kept climbing the ever-growing staircase until it reached the platform where the dungeon core was. It was a long one-hundred-and-twenty-meter climb, although neither Boxxy nor Fizzy were tired in the slightest by the time they reached the top. A monster’s endurance really was on a different level, though the golem still grumbled about climbing stairs. Even if painfully long staircases didn’t exhaust her as they once did, it was still a huge waste of time. She was going to suggest some kind of elevator, but her thoughts got derailed when she noticed the reactivated dungeon core dangling in the air.

“Oh, so this is where you put the core,” she remarked curiously. “Gotta say, it’s a lot brighter than I was expecting.”

The yellow crystal ball bathed the surroundings in a bright light, almost as if it were a miniature sun. She had spotted the glow from the base of the impossibly tall chamber since it was the only source of light, but seeing it up close was really something else. It was also a very welcome sight. Fizzy’s eyes were incapable of piercing darkness, so she had to rely on a lantern to find her way through those sewers. If she was going to spend considerable time in here, having this miniature sun on hand would be most welcome.

Boxxy was an even bigger fan of it. Not only did the dungeon core shine its favorite color, but it also made Fizzy’s mithril frame practically dazzle and sparkle. It wanted to lick and touch her all over, wrap itself around her and keep her to itself for all eternity. Well, it would get plenty of chance to worship her shininess in the future, so it withheld itself and turned its attention to the scene developing directly underneath the dungeon core.

Although Kora and Xera were busy performing lewd acts as expected, it would appear they had mixed things up for once. The succubus was currently suspended in mid-air, with numerous thorny vines wrapped tight around her arms and legs. They gagged her mouth, preventing her throaty

moans of pleasure from escaping her lips as the barbed tendrils ripped and tore through her flesh. It was a blatant and shameless recreation of Boxxy's 'shapeshifting practice' from awhile back, and Xera was enjoying every moment of it. Kora, on the other hand, had taken a far more direct approach and was sitting off to the side, with her legs spread wide and all four of her hands forcing Ambrosia's face into her crotch.

"What are those two idiots doing?!" Fizzy practically screamed.

"That's what I would like to know," Boxxy echoed.

That said, the shapeshifter had a pretty good idea as to what was going on. Since its familiars were extensions of its magic power, the dungeon core recognized them as co-owners, of a sort. This allowed them access to all of the core's functions, although Boxxy had forbidden them from doing so without permission. It also meant that the dungeon master—in this case Ambrosia—would willingly and eagerly obey any order they gave. In this case, it was quite clear they had told the dryad to 'attend' to their 'needs.'

"Oh! Hey, squirt! Hey, boss!" Kora waved in between thrusts. "I'm just breaking in the new girl's throat!"

"Yeah! I can see that! But why?!" the golem shouted.

"Well, she doesn't have anything between her legs, so I can't do much else. She's surprisingly good at it though, so I can't really complain. Swallows like a champ, too!"

"Ugh, forget I asked," Fizzy scowled. "You meatbags are still as repulsive as ever."

The golem didn't really care for the lewd acts, mostly because they reminded her of unpleasant memories she was trying desperately to bury under a mountain of blood and praise. Boxxy, on the other hand, was largely indifferent since its sex drive was as non-existent as ever. Although it did learn to find some pleasure in the act recently, eating tasty things or playing with shiny things were far more enjoyable.

Still, Boxxy disliked what it was seeing because of what it considered to be two very good reasons. The first was that it was unlikely for a 'non-breeder' like Ambrosia to appreciate the demeaning manner in which Arms was

treating her, and would most likely not have agreed if not for the core's influence. It still wasn't clear how firm the dungeon's hold on the dryad's mind was, so this ran the risk of triggering some sort of rebellious thoughts that Boxxy really did not want to deal with. Snack's antics were arguably more acceptable since she put Ambrosia in the dominant position, but the shapeshifter didn't want to take any chances.

The second and more infuriating reason it saw this debauchery as a bad idea was that its familiars had acted behind its back, without its knowledge or consent, and it *really* didn't like that. Arms and Snack were therefore ordered to stop what they were doing and use their authority within the dungeon to set up an Artificer's workshop for Fizzy. The golem would direct them what tools, devices, machinery and equipment she'd need, and the demons would conjure the necessary items through the dungeon core. Materials would still need to be brought in from the outside though, as objects conjured through magic would disappear after a time and were unsuitable for training Jobs and Skills to the next Level.

While the others were doing that, Boxxy took a moment to call in for a consultation.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Ring-ring… Ring-ring

Click

"Hello. You have reached Demons 'R' Us," a familiar voice was heard. "What can I do for you today, Boxxy?"

"Hey, Carl. I have a question about my contracts, and how they interact with dungeon cores."

"Alright, let's hear it."

"So, I've gained control of a dungeon as its owner, but I don't like those two idiots having the same privileges as me. Can I somehow limit their access to its functions?"

"You can always order them not to."

“Well, yes, but I have to do that every time I resummon them. I want to permanently limit their authority.”

“Sorry, buddy, no can do. The only way that would work was if you contracted them through the dungeon core. But, since you did that with your Warlock Job, that pact is the only one they will respect.”

“Yeah, thought so. Figured I’d check anyway, you know?”

“Oh, yeah, no harm in that. What was it you liked to say? Asking is free?”

Carl’s smirk was practically audible from the other end of the line.

“Hold on though, you can contract demons through dungeon cores?”

“Uh, yeah? Isn’t that included in your Demonology Skill?”

“No.”

“Huh. Must need a higher Level… Anyway, there’s no problem with me telling you, since you do own a dungeon core. But, yeah, you can contract demons through that. There’s actually three ways of doing that. The first is through the Monster Spawner menu.”

Boxxy curiously inspected the Dungeon Management screen in its head. The Monster Spawner had so many unappetizing options that it had neglected to notice that it could enlist demons as common dungeon dwellers. Having those treacherous and unruly beings wander around its lair didn’t seem like a good idea though, so it would pass on this one.

“The second option is Guardian Assignment,” Carl continued explaining. “You can use that to hire rankers as mid-bosses or end-bosses, and you can more tightly control where they can go, what they can do, and how they behave when intruders show up.”

Demons could only Rank Up once and only through special and largely mysterious circumstances. Doing so would give them tremendous power that dwarfed that of the common variety. For example, if one were to summon an archfiend and a regular fiend using the same amount of MP and make them fight one another, the archfiend would literally mop the floor with the fiend ten out of ten times. Even then, there was an even wider gap

in power and ability between a random archfiend and Overlord Nagnamor himself, even though both were the same species.

As was to be expected, however, such high-class minions were not available for hire through the summoning contract of a Warlock.

“Lastly,” Carl declared, “you can have me arrange a special agreement that allows you to appoint ranker demons as dungeon masters.”

“I see,” Boxxy responded. “I already have that position taken care of, but it’s good to know I have that option. Thanks, Carl.”

“Hey, no problem, buddy. At least you bothered to ask. You would not believe how many mortals could’ve spared themselves some serious headaches if they just did that.”

“Then why don’t they?”

“Because people are idiots.”

“Yeah, I’ve been noticing that as well.”

“Anyway, you got anything else that needs taken care of?”

“No, that’ll be all. At least until I can afford another familiar contract.”

That moment was approaching soon, as Boxxy only needed to finish getting its Demonology Skill from Level 7 to Level 8.

“Alrighty then. Bye for now.”

Click

Having concluded its interdimensional call, Boxxy turned its attention towards furnishing the dungeon. Fizzy had already set up her tinkering corner, which included a bunch of workstations, four large cupboards for materials and parts, an assortment of tools, as well as a large forge and anvil for smithing purposes. As for the shapeshifter, it turned its attention towards fortifying the place. It placed a bunch of spike and dart traps around the sewer entrance. Those would be enough to take care of any wandering creature or vagrant that stumbled onto this place by chance. They’d also activate whenever Fizzy used the passage, but her mithril hide would have no problems deflecting that level of damage. The dungeon core would

maintain and re-arm the traps as needed, so Boxxy didn't need to give them any special attention beyond the initial setup.

The doppelganger wanted to build a few more things, but the dungeon core was rapidly running out of MP. Not to mention that the monster was running late and had places to be. It therefore decided to call it quits for the day and return to maintaining its public persona as an apprentice Ranger. The Job itself was more than just a cover, of course, as Boxxy legitimately thought it would be a great asset to its toolkit. Unlike that *other* Job its Cadaver Absorption picked up a few weeks ago, or the thoroughly useless Divine Attunement Skill it got off a Priest. Well, the former turned out to be a bit convenient in some unexpected ways, while the latter unlocked the advanced Faith (FTH) Attribute, so it did get some minor use out of them.

The spider-chest leapt over to the edge of the plateau it stood on and clung onto the far wall. It used a combination of Terrain Sculpting and Dungeon Expansion to make a tunnel into the side of the tree that led straight to the outside. The narrow passage opened up into the side of the hylt tree's trunk, with nothing immediately around it. The city of Azurvale stretched out underneath, dyed a vibrant shade of red by the setting sun. It would appear the monster's new lair was at a much higher altitude than it had initially imagined.

After getting its bearings and making sure to memorize this entrance's position, Boxxy sealed the tunnel behind it, turning it into a very shallow cave that was still technically part of the dungeon. In the future, it would just need to enter this tight space and transport itself into the dungeon proper through Nexus Access. That way, even if this hole-in-the-tree was discovered, nobody could gain entry through it. Realizing that the rectangular hole it made in the side of the tree was clearly unnatural on its own, it decided to camouflage it with a special door courtesy of the Trap Construction module.

Satisfied that its secret entrance was now complete, it changed its coloration to dark brown, matching the bark behind it, then climbed down the tree. On second thought, it might have to revise this entrance's location as it felt exposed, but it was probably good enough for the time being. It passed by

the tallest branch with people living on it, and kept going down until it reached a lonely, cheap-looking house built into the side of the hylt tree.

Standing in front of the shack-like home, it actually found itself looking forward to getting some actual rest instead of pretending to sleep while working on its Meditation Skill. It had the effect of passively increasing its automatic MP recovery, so it was well worth the effort. Still, these past few days had been slightly more mentally draining than usual, so it decided to take its bi-weekly dose of sleep a bit earlier than usual. It quickly ducked behind the house and changed into its fabricated persona; the same one it had adopted ever since it first came to Azurvale. Once it was sure its form was complete, it opened its Storage and deftly took out some clothes and chainmail armor, and put it all on immediately. After making itself decent, it walked around the house while equipping a set of three high-grade magic rings it acquired on the way to the capital.

[Your mass has been reduced by 40%.]
[Your weight has been reduced by 40%.]
[Your resistance to lightning has increased by 15%.]

Satisfied with the array of plain-looking jewelry on its slender right hand, it started releasing lust-inducing pheromones, put on its ‘game face’ and opened the front door boldly.

“Honey, I’m home!” it called out in a cheerful, feminine voice.

“Welcome back, Keira,” Rowana answered with a wide smile.

[General Information]
Boxxy T. Morningwood
Doppelganger (Juvenile), 5 months old
Member of Hidden Arrow
Level 13.44 Doppelganger
Level 50.00 Mimic (MAX)
Level 5.00 Cat (MAX)
Level 38.35 Warlock
Level 17.21 Artificer
Level 14.61 Ranger
3199/3199 HP (+11.7/sec)
2544/2544 MP (+2.6/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 384, DEX 420, AGI 434, END 563, INT 494, WIS 363, LCK 186, MNT 288, CHR 166, PER 177, FTH 16

[Mimic Skills]
Assassination – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Storage – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Cadaver Absorption – Lvl 8.42
Biomass – Lvl 11.23
Natural Armor – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Metal Mimicry – Lvl 9.57
Mend Flesh – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Adaptive Defense – Lvl 5.34
[Absorbed Skills]
Acid Spray – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Divine Attunement – Lvl 4.10
[Cat Skills]
Feline Agility – Lvl 6.95
[Doppelganger Skills]
Mirror Image – Lvl 5.63
Pheromone Control – Lvl 2.74
[Warlock Skills]

Summon Familiar – 10.00 (MAX)
Power Overwhelming – Lvl 9.13
Demonology – Lvl 7.83
Crystallize Magic – Lvl 8.44
Chant Reduction – Lvl 2.52
Demonic Insight – Lvl 3.79
[Artificer Skills]
Clockwork Expertise – Lvl 5.54
Explosives Handling – Lvl 3.72
Deconstruction – Lvl 3.21
[Ranger Skills]
Tracking – Lvl 2.53
Marksman – Lvl 3.51
[Hero Skills]
Chaotic Disposition – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
Agent of Chaos – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
Essence Concealment – Lvl 1.00 (MAX)
[Other Skills]
Shapeshift – Lvl 10.84
Stealth – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Lockpick – Lvl 3.55
Sword Mastery – Lvl 7.53
Meditation – Lvl 4.41
Projectile Mastery – Lvl 8.52
Dagger Mastery – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Ruin Mastery – Lvl 11.15
Domination Mastery – Lvl 7.51
Shield Mastery – Lvl 7.83
Staff Mastery – Lvl 5.32
Bow Mastery – Lvl 4.74
[Spell and Martial Arts]
Ruin Spells – Shadowbolt, Ebonfire, Frostbite, Dark Explosion, Shadowbind, Singularity, True Darkness, Massive Rejection
Domination Spells – Mass Panic, Delirium, Dark Infusion, Mind Blast
Other Spells – Implosion, Transfamiliar
Marksman Arts – Power Shot, Guided Arrow, Multishot

Interlude
Good News Travels Slowly, Bad News Has Wings

A group of three seasoned adventurers were having a little get together at a small pub. They just saw three rather invigorating fights earlier that afternoon, and their blood still boiled excitement, despite being of a rather advanced age. Which, as one might expect, made them rather rowdy.

“Look! Ah’m tellin’ ye, ye cannae take down a cyclops just by aimin’ fer the eye!” Hilda insisted, slamming her fist into the table.

“And I’m telling *you*, that teaching your students to ‘go for the dick’ will just get them flattened under its feet!” Faehorn argued.

The dwarf warrior and the elven archer always seemed to find something to argue about. The topic of tonight’s heated discussion was what constituted ‘proper takedown procedures’ for a cyclops. The monster in question was a six-meter-tall, one-eyed mountain of muscle that would easily stomp any adventurer under Level 60 or so. Lichter, the seasoned Paladin trainer and the other elf in the group besides Faehorn, just watched and listened to the debate with a knowing smile on his face.

The three of them had been working together for many years, and this sort of bickering was nothing new. The loud and muscular dwarf woman had been the party’s front-liner and preferred a direct ‘mace-to-face’ approach. The pointy-eared Ranger, on the other hand, insisted that discretion was the better part of valor and preferred more careful tactics. Lichter had acted as the group’s magical support and de-facto leader, meaning it was often his responsibility to put a stop to their quarreling and decide on a course of action. Once that had been settled, Hilda and Faehorn would put aside their differences and work together without question. At least until the next time they butted heads over their conflicting views and opinions.

That was all in the past, though. The three aging veterans had collectively decided to retire from active adventuring more than a decade ago, and acted as teachers and mentors ever since. It was a far less stressful line of work, to say the least. However, Hilda and Faehorn’s habit of having heated

arguments with one another had not died down in the slightest, despite the fact that they all had much more peaceful lives at this point.

“As if! Ye just need to slice his cock off and he’ll be down fer the count!”

Well, *relatively* peaceful.

“Hilda,” Lichter said calmly.

“Wot?!” she snapped back at him.

“Please refrain from screaming about slicing cocks at the top of your lungs.”

“Huh?! Oh. Right.”

The dwarf had just realized they were in a public space, and that the other patrons were throwing curious glances their way. She gave the onlookers a curt, “Sorry ‘bout that,” before turning her attention back to the drink in her mug.

“Honestly,” Paladin sighed, “I wish you’d consider your position already. How is that the behavior of a stonekin?”

“I *am* a stonekin, so anythin’ I do is the behavior of a stonekin,” the dwarf argued indignantly. “Besides, it’s not like ye’re one to act all angel-y all the time yerself.”

Though not immediately apparent, Hilda, Faehorn and Lichter were among the small number of enlightened that had reached Level 100 in a Job. This not only gave each of them powerful and unique Ultimate Skills, but also allowed them to Rank Up into a slightly higher state of being. Hilda, for instance, became a stonekin dwarf, while Faehorn was now a high elf. This had not only tremendously increased their innate strength, speed and endurance, but had also rejuvenated their bodies and nearly doubled their lifespans. Not to mention the special racial Skills that accompanied the transition.

In short, though achieving a Rank Up as an enlightened being was significantly more difficult than as a monster, it was also far more impactful. Unlike monsters, the people of Terrania couldn’t choose what they would Rank Up into. Dwarves always became stonekin and elves always turned into high elves. Unless one happened to be like Lichter and earned their Rank Up through a Level 100 religious Job, such as Monk, Priest, or, in this man’s case, Paladin.

Such enlightened would eschew their normal evolution to instead become angels, quasi-divine beings said to have been granted a tiny fragment of their chosen deity’s power. This manifested itself in a few ways, but the most obvious one was the Divine Flight Skill. This ability allowed its user to manifest a pair of gigantic, phantasmal, bird-like wings from their backs at will. These phantasmal limbs could be used to soar majestically and effortlessly through the air, though they constantly drained the angel’s MP while active. This was in exchange for whatever racial Skill one would normally obtain from their advanced race.

However, even though angels were granted extended lifespans and heightened physical abilities of other enlightened rankers, they were still very much mortal and susceptible to dying of old age. It wouldn’t be until they somehow managed to Rank Up a second time and become archangels

that they would obtain eternal youth, though they could still be slain in combat. This applied to all enlightened, not just those with religious inclinations. The third and final Rank Up was speculated to grant one true immortality, but those details were nothing more than the realm of legends, myths, rumors, and speculation.

That idea seemed glorious and tempting at first glance, but few comprehended just how much violence, bloodshed, and loss one had to endure to reach such a summit. Hilda, Lichter, and Faehorn were all too familiar with the sacrifices required to reach their current state of being. Each of them had suffered more than a few mentally and emotionally scarring events over their long and storied careers. These were the type of horrors that chipped away at one's soul until the only thing left of them was an empty, unfeeling husk. Assuming they survived, of course.

This weariness had been the main reason why these three had hung up their adventuring backpacks in favor of teaching. Passing on their mountains of accumulated experience to future generations and seeing promising youngsters grow into capable adventurers had been, in essence, a form of therapy. It 'recharged' them, allowed them to keep in touch with where they came from and reminded them of why they did the things they did.

That said, this was all a temporary arrangement. Like any true adventurers, Hilda, Faehorn and Lichter were determined to grow even stronger and aim for that elusive second Rank Up. In order to do that, they had to find and kill creatures that were still worth XP to their secondary combat Jobs. The opportunity to do so would arrive within a few short years, and the three of them were already planning and preparing to challenge it, fully aware that this adventure was likely to be their last.

But that was still a long ways away. For the moment, they were perfectly content to enjoy each other's company for as long as these peaceful and laid-back times lasted.

"… Think the Empire's gonna be comin' fer us?" Hilda asked with a grim look.

Although a dwarf, she genuinely considered Azurvale and the Republic to be her home. The students and 'those two pansies' she shared a drink with

were her family. If push came to shove, she'd defend them all without a second thought, regardless of who the enemy was.

"It's practically guaranteed," Faehorn answered with a sigh. "A friend in the military had been analyzing the probability of a war with the Empire and how well we'd fare in it. She's not supposed to talk about it, but she gave me some rather sound advice on the matter."

"Oh?" Lichter leaned in curiously. "Let's hear it, then."

"She said to stock up on lubricant and burn medicine," Faehorn grinned wryly, "because we're about to get F'd up the A without the sweet talk."

Hilda gave a hearty laugh while the Paladin covered his face with his palms.

"Seriously though," the Ranger continued, "it's been a long time coming. Those humans will always be like that. I mean, we all know Jennifer, right?"

He was referring to the human Monk that had been a part of their troupe in their glory days, several decades ago. They had to eventually part ways with her years back due to how ruthless and merciless she was. She also lacked anything resembling a code of honor, making it a wonder she managed to remain a Disciple of War without being disowned by her patron deity.

"*Knew* Jennifer," Lichter corrected him. "I heard that problem child's bad attitude earned her the ire of some bad people and she got herself executed."

"Ah… That's a shame," Hilda lamented. "I liked her, she was funny."

"Yeah, you muscle-heads were always on the same wavelength," Faehorn glared at her. "I mean, violence was the only thing you agreed on, but then again that was, and still is, your answer to everything."

"Now see, I know yer tryin' to insult me, Shoestrap, but I ain't gonna fall fer it, not when I've had a few drinks in me."

"Still, her skill in combat was quite promising," the Paladin tried to change the topic. "Compared to her, my students are a little… lacking. You saw them yourself, right?"

“I don’t know, Lichter, I think that guy with the buzz cut and the scar on his cheek was quite good. He actually recognized that ‘Juggernaut’ as the superior fighter and was far more cautious than the others.”

“Hah! Still got his ass handed to him,” the dwarf pointed out with a chuckle. “My lot fared no better though.”

It wasn’t just the Ranger and Rogue students that sparred against the so-called Rustblood Juggernaut earlier that day. The Warriors, Berserkers, Paladins and Monks had also had a go at her, though unsurprisingly, none had come close to even scratching her. Still, it meant the trio were able to see all of their respective pupils in action, which was more or less the point of the whole affair.

“There’s sumfin’ about the way she moves,” she continued. “I swear she could see the blows comin’ before they even took a swing at her.”

“You still gave her a good few dents, though,” Lichter smirked.

“Well, yeh. Don’t matter who or what it belongs to, all armor is naturally weak in certain places. Golems ain’t no different ye know! What sorta teacher would I be if I didn’t show my lot how to fight a well-armored target like that?”

She gave an accusing glare at Faehorn, who returned it with a sharp stare of his own.

“Any Ranger that tries to fight that thing head on is already a failure in my book.”

“Bullshit! Ye could take her easy!”

“I’m not so sure about that. I mean I could definitely do it if she were an ordinary steel or iron golem, but a mithril one? And a Paladin to boot? I’m not saying I can’t beat her if push came to shove, but it certainly wouldn’t be easy.”

“Ye about that, how in the blazes did a golem become a Paladin?”

“Well, Hilda, as it turns out she used to be a gnome,” Lichter informed her.

“Get out!”

“No, I’m serious. I was one of the people the authorities consulted regarding her strange condition. I won’t divulge her circumstances beyond that though. It would be rude to her as a person.”

“Betcha you woulda loved to make her yer student, huh?”

“Oh, immensely so. Unfortunately, she already follows another path, different from that of Nyrie.”

“Lemme guess. She follows the good ol’ God of Probability, right?”

“That’s right.”

“Figures. She fits right in with the rest of those nutjobs.”

The three of them had come across dozens of the God of Chance’s followers over the years. There did not seem to be many of them, but one or two always turned up whenever big things went down. Whether they were involved in said events directly or just happened to be there was unclear, but it didn’t matter. Any adventurer that traveled the world for long enough eventually learned that the appearance of the faithful of the Goddess of Uncertainty heralded great and sudden change. Sometimes violent, sometimes not, but always troublesome.

“No wonder she’s so fecking random,” Hilda continued. “I mean, that muffin song? Seriously?!”

“You didn’t seem to complain when you sang along with the students,” Faehorn pointed out.

“… It’s a fun song, okay?”

“I suppose spreading that jingle is her way of worshipping her God,” Lichter mused. “I suspect that Brendan is who she’s referring to when she sings of the muffin man that lives inside her head.”

If nothing else, using a nickname or an alias was far better than trying to write out the deity’s ever-changing name with pig entrails like that weirdo they had encountered years ago.

“That or she’s completely bonkers,” said the dwarf. “That sort of viciousness she showed in the arena? That’s not something a sane person would do.”

“Perhaps,” agreed the Paladin, “but she knows enough to hold back outside the ring and obeys the same laws as everyone else. She even applied for an Artificer Mentor permit with the Hammers. Even if turbulent, her way of life still seems like a respectable one.”

“I’m actually with the old bat on this one,” the Ranger said sternly. “The way her attitude changes in the blink of an eye is downright terrifying. I don’t care what she used to be or how well she behaves herself, I’d never trust a monster with my life.”

An entirely reasonable stance, especially considering Fizzy’s civilized side was little more than an act.

“Anyway, I think we’ve gotten a bit off topic,” Lichter realized. “Tell me Faehorn, do any of your students show promise?”

“Hmm… there’s none that are completely hopeless and all of them should graduate the way things are going. Only three of the bunch show any real promise though.”

“Ah, that’d be the green-haired lass, the black-haired lad and the red kitty, right?” Hilda asked.

“Yeah them. Miller, shows a lot of promise, despite being an Empire-born elf and a power-leveler. I wish more people like him took time to study the basics rather than blindly rely on their ill-gotten Levels.”

“Isn’t the green-haired one Lia Torlee?” said the angelic elf, cupping his chin in thought. “The innkeeper’s daughter?”

“That’s her. She has great aim and superb judgement. I expect her to go far if she specializes as a sharpshooter.”

“What’s the deal with the kitty though?”

“Please don’t call her that,” Faehorn pleaded with Hilda. “She’s my precious student, and I’d prefer if you didn’t belittle her.”

“Bah, ye know I mean nothin’ by it! Go on, then! Out with it!”

“She’s… strange. I don’t mean the way she looks or acts, but the way she uses a bow. It’s like—both her stance and draw are good while her hands and eyes are steady, right? Yet I could swear she shifts her aim at the very

last moment. As if she misses her targets on purpose, like she doesn't want to stand out because of her ability."

"Her Appraisal showed she's a normal girl, right?" the dwarf hazarded a guess.

"That's right."

"Think she's a Hero?" Lichter asked in a hushed tone.

It was a little-known secret that those chosen by the Gods could hide their strength from an Appraisal so as to not attract the wrong kind of attention. The only reason these three knew about it was because they worked with the Hero of Rain for a time. He was a raptor, a reptilian species of enlightened that had far more pronounced animalistic features than the various types of beastkin. Rather than a man with scales and a tail, he looked more like a crocodile that had learned to walk on its two hind legs. His kind oftentimes got mistaken for monsters by ignorant 'smoothskins,' which was why they rarely visited this continent. The one Lichter referred to was a special case since Heroes of Rain were known as wanderers and travelers first and foremost.

This particular one was also rather touched in the head, but that was beside the point.

"That's what I thought too, so I tried to confirm it," Faehorn explained in a whisper. "I tried attacking her from her blind spot, directing all my bloodlust towards her as I swung a dagger at the nape of her neck. I figured if she's hiding her strength, then she'd avoid or catch it."

"Oh my Goddess…"

"Sweet fuck, Faehorn!" shout-whispered the dwarf. "What if ye were wrong and the poor lass was just a messed up kid?!"

"I wasn't actually going to hurt her, okay?! I was planning on stopping short, maybe giving her a small cut at most, you know!"

They exchanged some difficult looks. All three of them knew what he did was a terrible idea that could have gone horribly wrong. That clearly didn't happen though, considering how the girl was alive and healthy just a few

hours ago. But even if they didn't exactly approve of the man's actions, Lichter and Hilda still wanted to know the outcome.

"So?" the dwarf urged.

"So, nothing. She didn't even notice my presence until my dagger pressed against her skin, at which point she leapt in shock and cut herself on it. I managed to play it off as a training exercise, but…"

He shook his head in remorse before continuing.

"I feel really terrible for pulling that on her. I was probably just imagining things since I expect too much from her."

Only truly exceptional individuals got chosen as Heroes—people who already had the potential to become legends. It was only natural a teacher would yearn to have such a promising individual under his or her wing.

"She's honestly the most promising one of the bunch, even if her stamina is terrible," he added.

"Wasn't she the one that turned tail and ran like her life depended on her the instant the spar started?" Hilda raised an eyebrow. "Well, she still got caught in the end though, despite being a scaredy cat."

"That's exactly why she has potential. You know, I asked my students to think up of countermeasures against that golem ahead of time? Morgana's the only one that had the right answer."

'It's okay to run away,' was the lesson Faehorn had been trying to teach today. Rangers often worked separate from others, as it was their duty to scout out the enemy, look for traps or ambushes, and locate targets of high importance. The ability to know when to withdraw and when to fight was a vital skill that could mean the difference between life and death for the whole party, not just the scout.

"Heh, she's a scaredy cat! Hee hee hee!" Hilda laughed into her mug, clearly not paying attention to Faehorn's words.

"Still better than that moron who just kept mindlessly swinging at the Juggernaut until her weapon broke," mumbled the clearly irritated Ranger.

“Hey! Lola had the right idea, okay?” the dwarf snapped. “Mithril is stubborn, so it doesn’t crumble unless you really put yer back into it! She would’ve done better if her weapon was dwarven-made or Empire forged! Not this shitty Republic pig iron! No wonder you elves got your asses handed to you in the last war!”

The dwarf’s sudden outburst reminded the rowdy group that a war indeed loomed over them, and they grew quiet once more.

“Those kids will probably be sent off to fight, won’t they?” Faehorn lamented.

“Yes,” Lichter nodded. “Best we can do is prepare them for the worst, and hope they survive. Think we ought to start teaching mixed unit tactics ahead of schedule?”

“Aye, that might be for the best…” the dwarf grumbled. “I’m thinking of pulling some favors from my days in Horkensaft. Try and get me lot geared up in the good shit on the down-low. Enchanted Azurite, probably.”

“Don’t suppose you can spare a few of those armor sets for mine, Hilda?” asked the Paladin.

“I’ll try. Cannae promise anything though. Faehorn, any idea when it’ll start?”

“My contact in the government said they’ll likely hit us in a month or two.”

“What? Right before winter?”

Common sense dictated that forced marches during the cold season were tantamount to suicide, especially this far up north where the winters were harsher. Azurvale was still more or less comfortable due to the blessed hylt trees, but long-distance travel across the Republic would be halted until spring.

“Something about occupying a bunch of land and using the season to consolidate their power while the armies are unable to move freely,” the elf explained. “My contact’s an Underwood that owes me one, so I’m sure she’d never tell me anything she wasn’t absolutely sure of.”

He took a sip of his drink and gave the dwarf a humorless smile.

“Well, she does sometimes say ridiculous things, though.”

“Like what?” asked Hilda.

“That there was a ‘non-zero chance’ of the Sandman moving in to single-handedly repel the imperials.”

“Hah! Ye, right,” the dwarf snorted with laughter. “There’s also a ‘non-zero chance’ that a bloody meteorite was the cause of that hylt fire last night.”

Chapter Two
All That Glitters

Part One

“Aaah!”

Keira suddenly started flailing and screaming, waking both herself and the elf she was sharing a bed with.

“Wha? Keira?! Are you okay?” Rowana asked in a blind panic.

The platinum-blonde elf rubbed the sleep from her eyes and saw that red-haired beastkin breathing roughly, looking around in a distressed state and drenched in sweat. She calmed down a few moments later, then laid back down and curled up in the fetal position.

“More night terrors?” her girlfriend asked while gently rubbing her back.

“Uh-huh…”

“It’s okay, love. I’m here.”

She hugged the frightened catgirl around her waist and buried her face in that shoulder-length crimson hair, nuzzling against her neck. She didn’t know the exact reason, but this sort of thing seemed to happen every two or three nights. The beastkin had told her that she suffered from sporadically recurring nightmares, but couldn’t remember them after screaming herself awake. Being understanding and trusting, Rowana didn’t pry and merely tried to comfort her lover every time this happened.

Of course, that whole ‘night terror’ excuse had been just that—an excuse. In truth, Keira did not have dreams. She wasn’t even a real person, but a shapeshifting monster in disguise. One that was still learning to wake up without causing a ruckus. Although it had gotten better at controlling those outbursts as of late, it was still one of the things it hadn’t quite mastered. Hence why Xera told it to use the vague excuse about bad dreams. Boxxy initially questioned the efficacy of such a dubious cover story, so it was quite surprised how well it had worked out.

Rowana, as the succubus had determined, was a person of outstanding moral fiber. She was the sort of idiot that went out of her way to help those in need. Finding out that her new ‘girlfriend’ suffered from frequent

nightmares had only drawn her deeper into the lie that was Boxxy's public persona. Indeed 'lie' was the most accurate word to describe the character of Keira Morgana, as she had been invented almost entirely from scratch. Her name, appearance, past, and supposed personality were all fabricated. Admittedly some of those aspects were still works in progress, but Xera felt that she and her master had put together quite the convincing character.

There were a few reasons why the devious pair had decided against impersonating an elf. The main one had been Boxxy's need to excuse any bizarre and awkward behavior while it settled into its role. Appearing as a destitute foreigner who was largely ignorant of elven culture accomplished that beautifully. Settling on a cat-eared beastkin in particular had more to do with Boxxy's recent acquisition of the Cat Job via thoughtless application of Cadaver Absorption on an alley cat it had randomly stumbled upon. It was the shapeshifter's way of convincing itself that the recent and permanent addition to its Status had not, in fact, been entirely worthless.

That aside, Keira Morgana's profile had been decided on long before her appearance had been finalized. She was to be observant, bold, energetic, good natured, and rather blunt with her words, yet surprisingly shy and lacking in confidence when it came to intimate relationships. She smelled nice, had a pretty face with a cute smile, was a bit of a glutton, and was eager to learn more about elven culture and society. She came here to escape some traumatic event and forge a new life for herself. Her body was lithe, agile and quick. She had a sensitive butt and ears, and got tired pretty easily.

This mixed bag of half-truths and outright fabrications made it easy for Boxxy to assume the fictitious identity. Any quirky behavior was just explained away as 'Keira being Keira' and any deeper inquiries into her past were met with a rude, angry, or gloomy refusal to answer. There was a lot more to deal with than the occasional social gaffe, however. The monster had to constantly keep track of a mental checklist of dos and don'ts, as well as making sure to properly restrain its strength, speed and endurance to levels appropriate for its public persona.

Also, its weight had been a difficult thing to hide. Being a doppelganger with a high Level of Biomass made the creature much heavier than it

looked, and there was simply no such thing as a two-hundred-kilogram teenager. At least not one that looked as thin, short, and fit as Keira. It was the sort of thing people seemed to notice just by the way the floorboards creaked ominously under Boxxy's feet. Thankfully, the shapeshifter had been able to come up with a solution—use an enchanted trinket that magically reduced its weight.

Unfortunately, the most potent one it could have made on short notice was a Steel Ring of Greater Featherweight. It reduced the weight of the creature's body by 40%, which wasn't enough for its needs. It couldn't just wear two Featherweight rings either since enchantments of the same type did not stack. That would have been the end of that if Fizzy hadn't suggested that Boxxy pair its new item with a Steel Ring of Greater Matter Disruption. The enchantment's name was a bit suspect, but its effects had been to reduce the wearer's mass by 40%.

The golem's Artificer Job was a high enough Level to give her access to the Physics Skill. This ability gave its user a thorough understanding of gravity, inertia, thermodynamics, sound, and other such natural laws and phenomena. This was why Fizzy was not only aware of the subtle difference between mass and weight, but also knew how magic could screw with both of those parameters. As a result of her insight, Boxxy was able to overlap the two *technically* different enchantments, resulting in its overall body weight being reduced to about a third of its original value.

The shapeshifter had no idea why or how it worked that way, but that didn't stop it from abusing the 'loophole.' That said, using both the Steel Ring of Greater Matter Disruption and the Steel Ring of Greater Featherweight took some getting used to. It was shockingly easy for the thrice-lighter Boxxy to accidentally launch itself into the air if it put too much energy in its step. The 'floaty' feeling it felt was both irritating and uncomfortable, but nothing a creature with the patience of a dungeon mimic couldn't handle. Though not ideal, this solution was necessary if it hoped to mask its abnormal weight during the more… *physically involved* aspects of its daily routine.

As Boxxy lay there and silently allowed Rowana to have her fill of cuddling, it realized something. Doppelgangers had supposedly been more

common in the past, at least according to what that beholder mentioned at the border town shortly before it crossed the border. How did they deal with issues like these? Surely not all of them had to resort to moderately expensive magic items, right? Did they avoid forging fake relationships because of that?

Thinking it could learn something from their mistakes, Boxxy decided it would do some research on the subject. It knew just the place too. There was a shared library in the Central Consortium building that all associated guilds had access to, and that was bound to have some good information. The shapeshifter had only recently gotten the hang of reading, and was rather eager to put its newly-acquired literacy to the test.

Filled with motivation, it tried to get out of bed, but Rowana pulled it back in.

“Nuh-uh!” the elf said indignantly. “You’re not going anywhere until I’ve given you enough cuddles to chase away the bad dreams.”

It could easily break out of her grasp of course, but doing so would not be in Keira’s character.

“But Rowie! I have things to dooo!” it whined in a rather childish tone.

“Not today, you don’t. You told me your class was taking a break, remember?”

“Right. I did do that,” the catgirl admitted somewhat bitterly. “What about you? Don’t you have work soon?”

Despite Boxxy’s turbulent awakening, it was still late enough in the morning to be about a half hour before Rowana’s shift at the clinic was supposed to start.

“Nope. Took the day off.”

“Uh… Okay. Why?”

“Because I want today to be all about us, and nobody else,” the elf tightened her hug.

Her behavior made Boxxy consider whether it had overdone it with the Pheromone Control Skill it had unlocked at Level 10 of its Doppelganger

Job. It used the ability to cloud Rowana's judgement by subtly and constantly subjecting her to a mild airborne aphrodisiac. The goal was to use lust and sex as substitutions for genuine romantic feelings, at least until the monster learned to fully emulate them. At least this had been Xera's intent when she wholeheartedly suggested this method.

This supposedly temporary measure seemed to have an unforeseen side effect—making Rowana lewder and clingier with each passing day. Only now did Boxxy consider the possibility that prolonged exposure to a doppelganger's emotion-influencing pheromones could have had a profound impact on the elf's psyche. Neither it nor its Snack had any idea how to handle this, so it decided to lower the dosage for the time being.

It wasn't going to stop, though. Its Doppelganger Job gained Levels not through killing or crafting, but infiltration. In more practical terms, this meant the creature needed to 'harvest' feelings of trust, love, companionship and other such silly emotions from unsuspecting people. Having Rowana both fawning over and lusting after Keira had been a major contributor in that regard, and Boxxy couldn't care less if the unsuspecting woman turned into a gibbering wreck in the process. The only thing it cared about was increasing its Level, even if that meant playing along with the elf's bothersome requests.

The shapeshifter therefore decided to do just that and twisted around within Rowana's embrace so the two of them were face-to-face.

"Alright, I guess I'll keep you company for the day," the redhead said with a small smile.

"You don't *have* to indulge me, you know," the elf stated firmly. "If you don't want to, then-"

"No, no, nothing like that," Keira reassured her. "I was just a bit surprised. I'm… not used to someone caring about me so much. That's all."

"Well, for what it's worth, this is a bit new to me, too."

"Waaaait a minute. Didn't you say you've had other girlfriends before?"

"Yeah, but none of them could make my heart race quite like you do."

Admittedly that was mostly due to her heightened libido reacting to Keira's engineered attractiveness, but Boxxy wasn't about to point that out.

"… You mean that?" the redhead asked in a more somber tone.

"Of course, I do."

"But you barely even know me."

"Maybe, but that's just how I feel."

"But what if I do something stupid? Like if I break another law, or get you fired, or-"

The elf pressed her forehead against her lover's and looked her straight in the eyes.

"Let me put this as simply as possible. You complete me, Keira Morgana. Nothing's gonna change that."

The girl's face flushed with embarrassment, making her bronze cheeks grow a few shades darker.

"Got that, love?"

"Y-yeah…"

Though it looked too flustered for words on the outside, Boxxy cackled gleefully in its mind. Just how dumb could this elf possibly be? Stumbling onto her had been a tremendous stroke of luck. Frankly speaking, it would've tried to bamboozle some lonely sucker regardless of who they were. Rowana Slyth just happened to be the first one it had caught in its fuzzy-eared trap. It hadn't expected her to so eagerly eat up this 'Keira' bullshit, but it wasn't about to look a gift chest in the hinges.

Unfortunately, the shapeshifter realized too late that this mockery of a relationship had a downside to it. According to what that girl Lia said, a considerable number of elves viewed same-sex couples as unnatural and borderline heretical. The thought that such an opinion could exist hadn't even crossed Boxxy's mind. After all, its familiars 'got along' quite well and both of them were technically female, so it failed to see how Keira and Rowana becoming lovers could be an issue. The risk of being ostracized by

society at large because of something silly like that was, put simply, not tasty.

That oversight was hardly a deal-breaker though. Rowana was far too convenient an XP farm for Boxxy to just dump her. Besides, this situation could potentially be turned into an advantage. Masquerading as ‘the girl fighting for her forbidden love’ would serve as Keira’s excuse to seek fame and fortune as an adventurer. Establishing its public persona as a reliable Ranger would help it gain influence and connections, which translated into powerful items and valuable information. Not only that, but the gold and Levels earned while ‘on the job’ would be quite shiny and tasty.

And to that end, it thought it was perhaps time to take things a step further.

“Say Rowie… will you go out on a date with me?”

In other words, if others were to believe Keira truly cared about the elf, then the two of them would need to be seen in public together. Plus, it seriously didn’t want to spend the whole day cooped up in a tiny house, even if just to appease this woman.

“A date? But what about… you know…” she hesitated.

“I don’t care what people think. If you want to spend the day being romantic, then do it right.”

The elf looked troubled by this proposal, but it was rare for Keira to be so assertive and she found it nigh-impossible to refuse without a good reason.

“Okay,” she consented after a pause.

“Yay!”

“But no kissing in public!” the elf quickly added.

“Aw… What about nuzzles?”

“Excuse me, what?”

Keira smiled, pulled Rowana closer, and affectionately rubbed her cheek against hers.

“Okay! N-none of that either!” the elf stammered in surprise.

“Meanie,” the catgirl pulled away with a pout.

“Look, this is just how things are, so bear with it, okay?”

“I know, I know,” Keira reassured her. “Honestly, I don’t think I’d have the courage to do that stuff in front of others even if it were… er… accepted.”

“I can’t say the same, though,” Rowana smirked while gently rubbing her lover’s lower back. “It’s *really* hard for me to keep my hands off you.”

“R-Rowie? What are you- Ahn!”

“Hehe, I’m just getting it out of my system!”

After a quick morning romp, the two of them got up and got dressed. Rowana cleaned up and prepared breakfast with Keira lending a hand. Boxxy didn’t usually find ‘people food’ to be particularly tasty unless there was meat involved, so it made sure to establish Keira’s character as a voracious meat eater. As it turned out, meat was rather expensive, meaning it would often have to make do without. After all, Keira was supposed to have been extremely poor before arriving to Azurvale, with barely enough money to pay for her Ranger training and equipment. Someone like that couldn’t afford eating meat every meal, and Rowana was far too frugal to spend her entire apothecary’s salary on such ‘frivolities.’

Boxxy was therefore forced to endure the elf’s cooking. It wasn’t as if the dishes she prepared tasted bad. In fact, it they were pretty good when compared to other ‘people food’ the shapeshifter had sampled. However, none of it could compare to the flavor and sensation of ripping freshly killed human flesh off the bone.

After a hearty breakfast of eggs, toast, jam and porridge, the two of them put on their town clothes and went out into the city. Rowana wore a modest, long, navy blue dress while Keira wore her guild-issued green tunic and custom-tailored leather pants with a special opening in the back for her tail. She would have put on her chainmail armor as well if Rowana hadn’t reminded her not to.

“We really need to get you some new clothes,” the elf declared. “You only have two outfits, and both of them are so… bland.”

“Uh… I’d like to, but I don’t have much money left over from that pest control expedition a few days back.”

Even if they were trainees, the guild still paid Keira and her class for their assistance with termite control. The hylt tree farm was a source of timber and fruit for the city as well as the surrounding area, so it was important to look after it. Unfortunately for the students, their pay wasn't much since part of it went towards their training fees. While their earnings were enough to secure food, water, and simple clothing, they were still expected to do menial Quests around town if they hoped to earn enough for rent or better equipment. Things like fashionable outfits were considered luxury goods as far as trainee adventurers were concerned.

"Who said you'd be paying for them?" Rowana raised an eyebrow. "I'm the one that wants to see you in cute clothes, so I'll handle the bill."

"You, uh, sure you can afford it?"

"Really, Keira? I may be living humbly, but that doesn't mean I'm some pauper who's struggling to survive."

"I know; I just think there are better things to spend money on."

Like meat, the shapeshifter added internally.

"Just shut up and let me buy my girlfriend a gift."

"Alright, alright. Today will be your treat. Happy?"

"Very," the elf beamed. "Let's go."

Boxxy followed her out of the small house, mildly satisfied that it didn't need to spend any of its funds on this outing. Admittedly, it did hoard enough valuables inside its Storage to buy an entire mansion, but it didn't accumulate so much wealth by spending it on something as un-shiny as fancy clothes. Wait, could clothes be shiny? Just because it hadn't looked for any didn't mean they didn't exist. Now that it thought about it, it vaguely remembered hearing something about gold-threaded fabrics. And if gold could be incorporated, what about mithril? Or gems? Or both?!

Needless to say, the shapeshifter suddenly felt a lot more motivated to go on this 'date.'

[Ambrosia: Milord, we hath finished establishing milady Fizzy's workshop.]

An update from Boxxy's new 'employee' interrupted it while it was in the middle of imagining a wildly unrealistic cloak made entirely out of diamonds. The shapeshifter changed mental gears and processed the news. Its orders had been carried out in a relatively short time span, which was good. However, something struck it as rather odd.

[Boxxy: How come you're the one telling me this and not Snack or Arms?]

Its familiars were the only ones with the authority and ability to carry out the task in question, yet neither of them mentioned anything.

[Ambrosia: We had a friendly competition to see which one of us would relay the good news.]
[Ambrosia: I won.]
[Boxxy: Is it really that big a deal?]
[Ambrosia: Indubitably. We art all eager for milord's favor.]
[Boxxy: Okay, if you say so.]
[Boxxy: What about Fizzy? Does she have everything she needs?]
[Ambrosia: No, milord. She claims she requires additional materials and specialized tools.]
[Boxxy: Can she get those on her own?]
[Ambrosia: Verily. She is currently on her way to secure them.]
[Boxxy: Very good. I'll come back to check on the workshop later tonight.]

There was a brief pause before the next message came through.

[Ambrosia: Milord, forgive mine insolence, but I feel I must protest.]
[Boxxy: About what?]
[Ambrosia: I find thy mechanical servant's very existence to be offensive.]
[Boxxy: What? Why?]
[Ambrosia: She is most unnatural, an affront to all that lives and grows.]
[Boxxy: I see.]

It would appear that trees and golems did not mix. It made sense, in a way.

[Boxxy: Will this be a problem?]
[Ambrosia: Tis a vexing circumstance to be sure.]
[Boxxy: Vexing or not, she's one of my valuable belongings.]
[Ambrosia: I am aware, milord. Tis why I hath not yet ejected her from the dungeon.]

[Boxxy: Can't you just ignore her or something?]
[Ambrosia: Of course, I can.]
[Boxxy: Then why mention all the 'unnatural' stuff?
[Ambrosia: I simply wished to inform milord of-]

"Keira?"

Rowana's voice startled Boxxy, momentarily pulling it away from its chat with the dryad.

"What is it, Rowie?" it asked dumbly.

"Are you alright? You seemed worried about something. Not to mention awfully silent."

It would appear the shapeshifter was so preoccupied with its internal conversation that it had neglected its role as Keira, which the elf immediately picked up on.

"No, no, I'm fine. I just spaced out for a bit. You were saying?"

"I asked what sort of colors you liked. You know, for your outfit?"

"Oh. Huh. Never thought about it, actually. Hmm…"

Keira furrowed her brows and cupped her chin in thought while Boxxy finished its conversation with the dryad.

[Ambrosia: I simply wished to inform milord of mine honest opinion.]
[Boxxy: Okay. Will it help if I tell her to be as quiet as possible and stay out of your way?]
[Ambrosia: It would be most appreciated.]
[Boxxy: I'll do that, then.]

With that settled, the shapeshifter turned its attention back to Rowana and her thoroughly trivial question. It was such an inconsequential inquiry that it saw no reason to bother with a lie and would, for once, give her an honest answer. The only issue was that the monster didn't exactly have a favorite colour, so it instead listed the colors of its favorite things.

"Royal yellow, I guess? Or maybe pure white. Deep crimson is also good."

Namely gold, mithril, and blood.

“Hm, I figured you’d like warm and vibrant colors like those,” the elf nodded sagely. “Alright, I think I know just the place!”

She grabbed Keira by the hand and dragged her up the long set of stairs they had been climbing for the past few minutes. This wooden staircase had been built directly into the side of the titanic hylt tree, and served to connect Rowana’s house to the street-sized branch that loomed over it.

‘Street-sized’ was a very apt descriptor, as the elves had turned the gigantic limb, and many more like it, into a literal boulevard. A constant stream of pedestrians walked the paved middle portion of the branch, ducking in and out of the various shops, restaurants and markets lining its edges. A long and wide layer of canopy stretched overhead, giving the impression that the entire thing had been built in a green tunnel.

The beastkin-elf couple walked casually down the road, and it wasn’t before long that Boxxy noticed something… odd.

“Is it me, or is the ground moving?” it asked as Keira.

“Hm? Oh, that’s just the sway. Don’t worry, you’ll get used to it,” Rowana reassured it.

“… Sway?”

“Yeah. We’re on a branch. Those tend to sway in the wind.”

“But I don’t feel any wind.”

“Because the leaves, bark, and buildings absorb it all.”

“Uh-huh… Say, Rowie?”

“No, it’s not going to suddenly fall off.”

The elf went on to explain that Keira’s concerns were understandable, but entirely unnecessary. Yes, a residential branch snapping off would have catastrophic consequences for everyone living on and beneath it. That was why the city had a dedicated group of specialists regularly inspect the integrity of all major hylt branches since time immemorial. It had been thanks to their collective and ongoing efforts that Azurvale has never experienced a ‘catastrophic collapse scenario,’ as Rowana put it.

“And anyway, these are the oldest hylt trees in the world,” the elf chuckled as she rounded off her explanation. “I doubt anything other than an elder dragon could break these branches.”

A statement Boxxy was inclined to believe after personally meeting one of the dryads that resided within these colossal plants.

“You sure seem to know a lot about this swaying stuff,” Keira commented.

“It’s common knowledge around these parts,” Rowana shrugged. “Most people really don’t worry about it, and neither should you.”

The shapeshifter was most likely going to do so anyway. Mostly because it was the Hero of Chaos, whose patron deity would no doubt love to see one of these street-sized limbs randomly pop off its tree. Thankfully, Mallory didn’t seem too keen to create such catastrophes herself, but there was no telling what Boxxy’s Agent of Chaos Skill might do. It was therefore a very good thing that the mysterious ability hadn’t activated ever since its wielder had crossed the border.

“Oh, this is the place!”

Rowana led Keira to a small boutique, manned by a kind-looking, gray-haired old woman. Unfortunately, the proprietor in question was human, which made her susceptible to Boxxy’s Butcher of Humanity Perk. The shapeshifter wasn’t worried though, as it had already figured out a way to counteract the instinctive fear its presence instilled in all humans.

For starters, Keira’s non-threatening appearance and cheerful disposition greatly dampened the Perk’s initial impact. It was why the old woman simply eyed the catgirl suspiciously rather than having a heart attack or something equally incriminating. She probably wouldn’t have noticed something was amiss if she just passed the beastkin on the street. And since Boxxy’s Pheromone Control Skill allowed it to literally radiate calmness, it only took a few seconds to completely erase that troublesome Perk’s effects from the old woman’s mind.

The best part about this approach was that it could be applied to an entire room of humans without any problems, though Boxxy naturally did its best to avoid such scenarios.

After overcoming what she believed to be a mild surprise at seeing a beastkin in Azurvale, the aged woman proceeded to measure the redheaded tomboy. She showed the couple a number of clothing designs to choose from. Rowana ended up placing an order for four outfits in total—a formal dress, a casual dress, a light blouse-and-skirt combo, and a set of rather risqué nightwear. The old tailor gave the elf a knowing look at that last one, prompting Rowana to claim that she was merely showing her 'roommate' how to best make use of her 'feminine charms.'

That slightly awkward encounter over with, the couple spent about half an hour just walking around, window shopping, and chatting. They eventually got on one of the floating platforms that served as public transportation and rode it down to the ground. They sat quietly in a park, discreetly holding hands until it was time for lunch. Rowana said she knew a place that served great food at a reasonable price, though it wasn't a restaurant.

The establishment just so happened to be a certain inn that was situated on the ground almost directly beneath the elf's cozy little treehouse.

"Well, well, well," said the old innkeeper when he saw Keira enter his place of business. "If it isn't the hooligan who won't stop jumping on my roof?"

"The roof!?"

Rowana took a deep breath following her outburst, then turned to face the guilty-looking beastkin.

"Keira, is there something you want to tell me?"

"Uhm. I may have… leapt down onto this building… a few times…" she answered sheepishly.

"*Leapt* down?! What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well…"

"You know this girl, miss?" the innkeeper interjected.

"Yeah. We're roommates," Rowana answered without looking away from Keira.

"Well, please tell her that vine-swinging is dangerous, and I won't be held responsible if she hurts herself."

“Oh-hoh!” the elf crossed her arms. “Vine-swinging, huh? You mean that superbly dangerous thing I told you to stop doing? The one I explicitly forbade on account of how unimaginably stupid it was?”

“It’s not like that!” the redhead insisted. “I was just, uh, practicing! Yeah, that’s it! Rangers need to be able to traverse all kinds of difficult terrain!”

This was a blatant lie. The real reason Boxxy swung from vines was because it helped build proficiency for its Feline Agility Skill, the only one derived from its Cat Job. Plus, it was genuinely faster than using the ‘proper’ way. Also, it wouldn’t die even if it fell. It already tested that by tying Snack up and pushing her off the edge. Granted, the impact with the ground had broken almost every bone in the succubus’s body and she expired shortly afterwards from a punctured lung, but she technically survived the initial impact.

“Bullshit!” the old innkeeper snapped. “My daughter’s never had to do things like that! Isn’t that right, Lia?” he yelled towards the back of the inn.

“What is it now, dad?” a green-haired elf poked her head out of the kitchen. “Oh, Keira!”

Her pained expression became pleasantly surprised when she saw her classmate. She ducked back inside the kitchen, shouted something about taking a break, and went out to give her friend a proper greeting.

“Hey, didn’t expect to see you here!” she said happily, completely ignoring her father’s shocked look.

“Lia! What are you doing here?!” Keira asked in genuine surprise.

“I’m helping my parents out with the family business.”

“In the kitchen?”

“Mhm. I know, I know, I’m not exactly the domestic type, but I can still make a killer croquette,” she boasted.

“How do you know this hooligan!?” her father interjected.

“She’s no hooligan, dad,” Lia rolled her eyes. “This is Keira, the one I was telling you about earlier.”

“What? That’s *her*?”

“Of course it is. How many catkin girls do you think there are in this city?”

“Are you sure?”

His daughter had described her classmate as kind-hearted, polite, awkward, determined, and hard-working, none of which were traits he’d associated with the ‘hooligan.’

“Yes, I’m sure. Now stop bellyaching about your dumb roof and go help mom in the kitchen before you embarrass me to death.”

Lia grabbed her mildly-protesting father by the shoulders and pushed him into the back while Keira, Rowana, and most of the customers looked on in a sort of bemused stupor. The patrons lost interest by the time the daughter returned, thankfully by herself.

“Sorry about that,” she apologized. “My dad likes to yell a lot, but he means well.”

“That would explain a lot,” Rowana nodded lightly.

“Ah, hello there. I’ve seen you around before, but I don’t believe we’ve met. I’m Lia Torlee, one of Keira’s classmates. And you… must be ‘Rowie.’”

“I am Rowana Slyth, yes.”

“I heard a lot about you.”

“Well, you have me at a disadvantage. I had no idea you existed.”

Boxxy was momentarily stumped. Rowana’s tone of voice was subtly different. Harsher, accusatory even. While the shapeshifter couldn’t figure out what the matter was, the apprentice Ranger seemed to have realized what was going on almost immediately.

“I assure you, Keira is not my type,” she said in a hushed voice. “I have no intention of stealing her from you so please stop looking at me like that.”

“R-right. Of course. Sorry, it’s just that… I don’t get a lot of chances at finding lo- love, so I got a bit… jealous,” Rowana stammered in embarrassment.

Oh, so that's what jealousy looks like! Boxxy exclaimed internally.

It hadn't seen that emotion up close before, so it made sure to memorize it for later reference. This was probably a good time for a response from Keira, but what kind? If Rowana was jealous, that meant she suspected her lover might be seeing someone else behind her back. This implied she didn't trust her girlfriend completely. Of course, Boxxy had no intention of 'cheating' on her. According to her made-up profile, Keira was the devoted and faithful type, so that would not happen, even if Lia did smell rather delicious. Therefore, the appropriate response in this situation was to vehemently deny there was anything between them.

"Rowie! You should know better!" it stated in a harsh whisper. "I'm not gonna go after any woman I see just because her boobs are bigger."

"Hey!" both elves responded in unison, crossing their arms over their chests. They then looked at each other, realized they had the same reaction and shared a small, awkward giggle.

"Come on, you two. Let's get you a table."

Lia guided the couple to some quiet seats in the corner. She joined them for lunch and said it was on the house. They chatted while they ate, and the two elves got along quite well, which was only to be expected considering they had a common topic in Keira. Boxxy didn't know how to respond to them poking fun at its public persona's quirks and habits, but the mood seemed jovial and light-hearted, so it decided to just go with it. The conversation shifted to more personal topics soon enough, anyway.

"Say Lia, you wanna join us on our girls' day out?" Rowana suggested.

"Wait, are you serious?" the other elf responded.

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Well, didn't you two say you were, y'know, on a date," Lia practically whispered that last part.

"We are, but… Haah," she sighed. "Honestly, I could really use a friend. Like, a *real* friend."

Though Rowana had no difficulty making a good first impression, maintaining meaningful relationships was another story entirely. Her paranoia regarding her sexuality made her keep people at arm's length. She would be hard pressed to find someone in her life that she considered to be anything more significant than an acquaintance or coworker. Lia, however, was different. She already knew of Rowana and Keira's naughty little secret, and her support of their relationship was quite refreshing.

In short, Rowana just wanted someone other than her girlfriend to share her troubles with.

"I mean, it's not like I can't," Lia said hesitantly. "The lunch rush is already over and it'll be a few hours before dinner prep starts, but is it really okay? With both of you?"

Though she didn't want to be the third wheel, she'd be lying if she said she didn't enjoy the odd couple's company.

"The more the merrier!" Keira declared.

Boxxy had already resigned itself to entertaining one moronic elf for the day, so why not bump that up to two? After all, more people to socialize with meant more XP for its Doppelganger Job. In fact, if things kept going this way it would probably hit Level 14 before nightfall.

"Alright then, I'll keep you company for a while. Just let me know if I'm a bother and I'll make myself scarce."

Lia excused herself to change out of her stained apron and came out in a casual dress similar to Rowana's, though this one was a pale green rather than navy blue. The three of them then set out in a random direction.

"Keira really needs some cuter clothes," Lia commented while they were walking down the street.

"I know, right?" Rowana exclaimed. "Don't worry, though. I already placed an order for some this morning. The blouse and skirt I picked out would look positively adorable on her!"

"Wow, she has it bad, huh?" the younger elf mumbled.

Rowana squirmed and squealed almost exactly like how Keira behaved whenever the catgirl talked about her girlfriend. That sort of behavior fit the youthful beastkin perfectly, but seeing a grown and mature elf act that way was a bit weird. Then again, Lia had never been in a romantic relationship before, so she had no idea if this was normal behavior. Or at least as far as 'normal' could be applied to these two.

"Hmm? Keira, what's wrong?"

The catgirl had stopped in her tracks to stare into the window of a pawn. She leaned in closer and looked through the glass, but couldn't tell which of the myriad of items lined up on the windowsill had caught her interest. Rowana was still daydreaming, so it took her a few moments to notice what the other two were doing.

"What's going on over there?" she asked.

"Dunno," Lia shrugged. "Keira?"

"I just need to check something out," the beastkin replied. "Be right back."

The redhead pushed the door open and walked into the shop, ringing a small bell dangling above the entrance as she did so. It was a decently-sized place, slightly bigger than Fizzy's old store back in Erosa. Numerous curious objects of all types lined the shelves along the walls or were on display inside the glass counters. Books, bells, weapons, jewelry, jugs, jars, board games, dolls, statues, flutes, lutes, hammers, cutlery, even the odd potion—this place seemed to have it all.

There was another ring at the door as the elf girls piled in behind Keira, mostly out of curiosity.

"Good afternoon, ladies," a balding elf greeted them jovially from behind the counter. "Welcome to Orym's Pawn Shop."

The man didn't bat an eye at the peculiarity of his visitors, even if one of them was a beastkin. The type of business he ran tended to attract all manner of odd individuals looking to buy or sell equally odd merchandise. Compared to his usual clientele, three pretty young girls randomly showing up in his shop was almost a godsend.

"So, what can old Orym do for you?" he asked in a jovial tone.

“Ask her,” Rowana and Lia simultaneously pointed at the redhead.

“Heh. Alrighty then, what’ll be little missy?” he turned to Keira. “I can tell by the way you were staring through the window you already have your eye on something.”

“Uh, yeah. Hi. I was just wondering, where did mister Orym get this?”

She stepped over to the display in the windowsill and pointed at an ornate jewelry box in the corner. It was rather small and cube-shaped, each side measuring somewhere between fifteen and twenty centimeters. It appeared to be made of wood, with some faint and worn out vine-like patterns carved on the sides, and stood on four very short and stubby legs. The rectangular lid was also wooden, with a single, circular red gem faceted right into the middle of it. All of the corners, edges and legs were gilded, giving the small box the undeniable feel of a miniature treasure chest.

“That, huh?” Orym mumbled while staring at it.

He blinked a few times trying to jog his memory, but couldn’t recall where exactly it came from. It had been sitting there for quite a while though, six months at the least. Nobody had shown even the smallest bit of interest in it before this fuzzy-eared kid showed up, so it was only natural he’d forget about it. It didn’t matter, anyway. He felt fairly confident it was his to sell, even if he couldn’t remember its origin. Wouldn’t be the first time it had happened.

“I can’t divulge that information.”

“You don’t know, do you?” the girl said in an accusatory tone.

“Don’t be silly,” he brushed her off. “Of course, I know. It’s in my shop, so I should obviously know how it got there, right?”

“Do you even know what that is?”

“It’s just an antique jewelry box,” he shrugged. “Collector’s item, really.”

The catgirl shook her head.

“Can I pick it up for a moment? I want to show you something.”

“Okay, but if you break it, you buy it.”

“Keira,” Rowana whispered. “Are you sure about this? We don’t really have the money to afford that thing in the first place.”

Splurging on some outfits and a day out on the town was one thing, but that an ‘antique collector’s item’ was completely out of the question.

“It’s okay, I got this,” Keira assured her.

The disguised doppelganger reached over, took the shiny box off the shelf and placed it on the counter in front of the pawnbroker. It then smiled at him, looked down at the box, let out enough murderous intent to make even Orym twitch, then firmly knocked on its lid.

“Yap!”

All three elves in the room jumped in surprise when the jewelry box gave out a high-pitched yell. It sprang to life and moved along its small legs towards the edge of the counter, trying to get away from the terrifying creature that had caught onto its identity. Keira’s hands deftly grabbed it by the sides and put an end to its daring escape attempt before it got past her arm’s reach. The others stared in silent disbelief as the catgirl nonchalantly dragged the living jewelry box back in front of her and held it down. She forced its lid open to reveal a red and wide tongue, a tiny throat letting out a pathetic whine, and a perfect set of short, flat, white teeth.

“I’m sure you won’t mind if I take this mimic off your hands, right?”

The shopkeeper gave a few short nods of his head.

“Thanks, Mr. Orym. I really appreciate it.”

Keira hugged the miniature chest against her underdeveloped chest and left the shop with a huge smile.

“What… just happened?” Rowana finally found her voice.

“I think you two just got a new pet,” Lia responded.

Part Two

“C’mon Keira, you can’t be serious!” Rowana protested. “That thing’s a monster, isn’t it?”

Of course she was upset. Her girlfriend had just picked up a rather outrageous creature from a random pawn shop and seemed like Keira had the intention of looking after it. Rowana wasn’t an adventurer herself, so she wasn’t a hundred percent sure what the small animate box really was, but it certainly didn’t look like a puppy.

“But, look at it. It’s so tiny and cute,” the catgirl argued.

Boxxy’s actual reason for wanting to look after this thing was a deep, nagging curiosity. Whatever this thing was, its internal structure was much different from the shapeshifter’s own. It was undoubtedly a type of mimic, but what kind was a mystery. It certainly wasn’t a Lesser or Greater variant of its old species, which meant it was likely a completely different being. Also, looking after this thing was the perfect excuse to look up research materials regarding shapeshifters.

It certainly wasn’t because the thing was moderately shiny or anything.

“Rowana! Keira! Wait up!” Lia shouted from further back.

She stayed behind for a few seconds to see if the distressed pawnbroker was going to be alright, as that little stunt had left him a bit pale. Orym insisted he would be fine after he sat down and had a nap, so Lia left him to it and pursued Keira and Rowana. Luckily, they’d only taken a few steps by the time she got out of the shop.

“Lia! Help me out here!” said both of the lovebirds at once.

“Okay! Let’s take a deep breath, calm down, and think this through. First of all, Keira, how in the blazes did you actually spot that creature?”

The masquerading monster paused for a moment while it threw together a less incriminating response than, ‘I spotted its fleshy insides with my Mana Locator Gland.’

"… I thought I saw it twitch outside the corner of my eye. When I went into the shop, it realized it had this weird smell about it. That's how I knew it wasn't a simple box."

According to Snack's lessons on common sense, beastkin had sharper senses than elves, so this sort of excuse seemed believable. Okay, maybe it wasn't airtight, but it was certainly more plausible than saying something like, 'I just knew' or, 'It winked at me.'

"Wait, does it?"

Rowana leaned in and took a sniff of the mini-mimic that Keira pressed against her chest. Although that thing did have a scent of its own, it was overpowered by the catgirl's slightly sensual 'musk.' The elf absentmindedly took a few more sniffs before noticing Lia looking at her weirdly. She forced out an embarrassed cough and straightened herself out.

"So, uh, yeah," Rowana stammered for a moment. "I'd say 'weird smell' sums it up nicely. It's like this bizarre mix of… dead rat and… hylt fruit?"

Boxxy had to try really hard not to let its relief show on its face, as it had failed to check its odor before blurting out that lie.

"Uh-huh… Anyway, Keira, do you know what that actually is?" Lia inquired.

"It's a type of mimic, obviously. But it's different from what I heard they were like."

"Yeah, you do have a point."

"What's a mimic?" asked Rowana, who was clearly out of the loop.

"They're dungeon-born monsters that usually look like treasure chests," the other elf explained. "Pretty much all the dungeons in the Republic have them, so they warn us trainees about these things in advance."

"So, it's a monster after all, isn't it? Like, not the sort of thing Keira should adopt as a pet?"

"Errr, maybe?" Lia scratched her cheek. "I mean, the ones I know of are supposed to be big enough to swallow a person whole and have these sharp and jagged teeth. This one seems… a lot less dangerous."

“How about dropping by the CC to check it out?” Keira suggested. “Surely mister Faehorn or one of the other veterans would know about it.”

“You sure it won’t just attack you?” Rowana kept worrying.

“It’ll be fine,” claimed the green-haired elf. “Keira clearly has a handle on it.”

That was an understatement. While the tiny creature did indeed struggle a bit in Keira’s grip, it was so pathetically weak that even a child would be able to hold it down. Boxxy’s monstrous strength wasn’t even a factor in the situation. Besides, even if it were to somehow slip out and try to bite something, those flat teeth wouldn’t even be able to break the skin. The only way this miniature mimic would kill anyone would be if it fell on them from a great height.

“Well… okay… I’m coming with, though,” Rowana insisted. “If, uh, that’s even allowed. I’m not really sure how things work over there.”

“It’ll be fine, Rowie,” Keira assured her. “We’ll just get you a visitor’s badge, it’ll be fine.”

The trio proceeded towards the Central Consortium building, which was about a twenty-minute walk, much to Lia’s dismay. She wasn’t sure how those two managed it, but they flirted the entire way despite everything that had happened. Being the dreaded third wheel made the junior Ranger feel more than a little uncomfortable, but she was far too curious about that creature’s identity to slip away.

Thankfully, the two lovebirds ceased their cooing when they entered the communal guild headquarters. Inside, they walked into a grand hallway with a staircase at either end of it. Each of the four floors was divided into a north and a south wing, with each of the eight major guilds getting a wing of its own. There were also a few common areas like the library, the cafeteria, and a number of meeting rooms, but the vast majority of each floor belonged to one guild or another.

The trio stopped by the front desk to get Rowana a visitor’s badge, then went up the Hidden Arrow guild’s offices on north wing of the second floor. Unfortunately, none of the high-ranking members, including instructors,

were in since some big meeting or conference demanded their attention. This was also why Keira and Lia's Ranger classes had been called off today.

Not to be discouraged, they visited the guild on the opposite side of the same floor—the Children of the Wild. Rangers and Rogues meshed well with nature-oriented Jobs, so the two organizations usually got along well. The Blessed of Nyrie and the Maleficum on the third floor, however, had a bit of a strained relationship to say the least. Given their respective specialties, it was like having an underground thieves' guild taking up residence opposite a courthouse. Nobody was sure how this arrangement had come to be, but everyone agreed that the person responsible for it was probably fired.

Regardless of inter-guild politics, Keira's group lucked out with their visit to the Children of the Wild, as a Level 63 Monster Tamer was available for a consultation right away. They all pitched in for the 40 GP consultation fee and the guild's clerk directed them to one of the shared meeting rooms. The girls found the room to be a bit bare, but spacious and comfortable. The walls were a soothing cream color and lacked decoration beyond the curtains. Three tall windows allowed plenty of natural light, while a large rectangular table sat in the middle with nearly twenty seats lined up around.

The three girls waited rather nervously, with Keira still hanging onto the mini-mimic. The creature seemed to realize it wasn't about to get squished and it was already aware it wouldn't be able to get away, so it had stopped squirming. At least that was what Boxxy assumed. It tried to slacken its grip on it, as if daring the creature to escape. The animate box did not take the bait, opting instead to just sit motionless and dead silent. Now, this thing didn't have a face to read, but the shapeshifter got the odd sensation that the thing wasn't sitting still because of fear, but awe.

The door swung open, and a bald gnome wearing a bushy black beard and a dark brown tunic walked in. He introduced himself as Jeremy Rizzlecrank, the Monster Tamer they asked for. The girls gave him their names in kind.

"Now, then," he said, clapping his hands together expectantly. "Let's see this peculiar beastie you found."

Keira got off her seat and placed the ‘beastie’ on the ground. The box continued to remain motionless, even after it was freed from its captor’s grasp. Rather than ask questions, Jeremy grabbed onto it and forced its lid open. The creature finally started squirming and whining as it had before, but didn’t resist or make trouble while the gnome inspected its mouth cavity. It wouldn’t have been able to stop the guy even if it tried anything, anyway.

“Hmm, teeth like that of an herbivore, tongue similar to a frog’s…”

Jeremy let go of the box, which closed its jaws and shuffled around a bit, making some mild yipping sounds in the process. The gnome took off his leather glove and poked at its mouth and teeth with an unprotected finger, seemingly trying to provoke it. Tt didn’t bite or attack the gnome, though it gave his finger a few licks before backing off while making retching sounds.

“Doesn’t seem particularly aggressive either,” the Monster Tamer mumbled.

He reached into a pouch on his waist and pulled out a jar that looked far too big to fit into it. That pouch was a Bag of Holding, a popular Superior-quality magic item. It could be anywhere between ten and fifty times bigger on the inside, and items stored within would feel up to four times lighter than they normally were. Boxxy had encountered these magic items before, but it wasn’t all that interested in them. They were expensive, un-shiny, and it already had access to a superior storage method.

The gnome twisted open the lid of the jar and took out what appeared to be a dried piece of peach, then presented it to the strangely docile mimic. The creature immediately stretched its tongue out, snatched the tasty treat out of his hand, and happily munched on it. It let out an excited, ‘Yip!’ which prompted the gnome to feed it two more pieces of dried fruit.

“What you folks have here is a house mimic,” he declared with a smile on his face. “Quite the rare thing you’ve found there. Not many of them left.”

“So… it’s not dangerous?” asked Rowana with a bit of apprehension.

“Nah, no more dangerous than a puppy or kitty. It’s not even a monster, not in the truest sense of the word.”

He lightly patted the jewelry box on the lid as it happily munched on its snacks to prove a point. The house mimic didn't shrink back or flinch this time.

"It's actually pretty cute, if you ask me."

"Yeah, guess it is."

Though Rowana was apprehensive at first, she had to admit it was strangely endearing.

"So, can we keep it?" Keira asked with a face full of expectation.

"I don't know… How would we even care for that thing?"

"Ah, that's easy really," said Jeremy. "These buggers mostly care for themselves. They don't poop or shed, and will eat pretty much anything, so long as it's a fruit or vegetable. They'll sometimes hunt bugs, rats, or other small vermin if they get really hungry. They like hylt fruits the most. Fresh ones are best, but dried works too."

"You sure seem to know a lot about them," Lia pointed out.

"Truth be told, I got one of my own back home, although mine's in the shape of a cookie jar. Found it three years ago while looking into some missing rations. Been keeping each other company ever since. As for this little guy, seems he was a bit starved and was trying to conserve energy by hibernating."

He fed the decidedly-more-energetic box a few more pieces of fruit before putting away the jar.

"So yeah, they make for interesting pets, but they're kinda stupid. Don't expect them to learn any tricks or something, and definitely don't count on them for home security. Not only are they all cowards, but their jaws are so weak they won't even draw blood if they tried to bite a burglar. Which they won't. The most they'd do is make a whole lot of noise."

He then gently picked the animate box and tickled its underside, which caused it to let out an odd purr-like noise.

"Oh, and their bottoms are sensitive, so while they like having them stroked, they'll get mad if you overdo it."

“Oh look, sweetie. Something you two have in common,” said Rowana with a coy smile.

“Rowie!”

“Sweet Nyrie. Not this again,” Lia grumbled, exasperated.

“So yeah, if you guys don’t wanna keep it, I’ll gladly take it off your hands,” offered Jeremy, who graciously ignored the couple’s exchange.

“We’ll keep it! Definitely keeping it! Right, Rowie?!” Keira enthusiastically asked.

“Jeremy, can you promise me it’s safe?”

“I swear on my life, miss Slyth.”

“… Okay then. I’ll trust your judgment on this.”

“Alright! Thanks, Rowie! You’re the best!”

Following Keira’s excitable character, Boxxy threw its arms around the elf and gave her a wet smack on the lips. This was much to Lia’s discomfort and Jeremy’s shock.

“Keira!” Rowana pushed the catgirl off.

“Ah… sorry… I got carried away…”

“So um, Jeremy, please don’t… I mean-”

“Fret not, miss Slyth. I’m a professional, and what happens in this room is strictly confidential. Besides, I’m not in the business of spreading salacious rumors.”

“Thanks.”

“Anyway, I suggest you folks get the little guy tagged and have him registered. You can do both of those at my guild’s office.”

“Uhm, mister Rizzlecrank? Can you recommend some books on mimics? Or just shapeshifters in general?”

“Oh ho, good attitude, miss Morgana! Knowing everything one’s pet is rather crucial if you wanna take care of them, especially in the case of magical critters like your square pal here.”

Well, that wasn't actually the reason Boxxy asked for those. If anything, it was already an expert on the matter of mimics. It just that it wanted to know what the world at large knew about its kind, lest it reveal too much information in the future.

"Check the library for volume three of Riften's Monster Encyclopedia. It should have the info you need. Word of warning though, there's some dark history attached to the whole mimic thing," the gnome added.

"Okay, thanks!"

"Sure thing. Do drop by if you have any more questions. I'll answer them free of charge, of course."

"We'll take you up on that offer when the time comes," said Rowana with a business-like smile.

The former mimic picked up its smaller 'cousin' and the three girls parted ways with the gnome.

"So, what are you guys gonna call it?" Lia asked on the way to get it registered.

"… How about… Goldie?" Rowana suggested.

"I don't know that's a little… common?" the other elf shrugged.

"… Shiny?"

"That's just puerile, Rowana."

"Maybe… Oh, I know! Red Eye!"

"What, after the gem in its lid? Is that real, by the way?"

"I don't know, but it's rather pretty."

"Anyway, 'Red Eye' isn't bad, but makes it sound a lot more vicious than it appears."

"Minic," Keira confidently declared.

"… I'm sorry?" Lia asked dumbly.

"It's a mini-mimic, so I'm gonna call it Minic!"

“That… I’m not sure if that’s genius or idiotic,” the younger elf shook her head.

“I think Minic sounds cute. Let’s go with that,” offered the older one.

The catgirl held the living jewelry box up above her head and gave it a wide smile.

“Pleasure to meet you, Minic!”

“Yap yap!”

The house mimic had perked up considerably after its meal. It let out a few high-pitched, almost bark-like sounds in response. Its soon-to-be-owners took it into the Children of the Wild’s office and, with Jeremy’s assistance, made its name official. A Scribe performed some kind of naming ceremony, engraving the critter’s name onto its Status. She then gave the couple a set of tags on a string meant to identify their pet’s owner as Keira Morgana. The girls thanked the clerk and then dropped by the library to check out the book their gnomish consultant had suggested. Eager to learn more, they all gathered around a table inside and looked up the entry on house mimics.

According to volume three of Riften’s Monster Encyclopedia, house mimics were the original mimics, predating their more violent dungeon-born counterparts by several decades. House mimics had apparently been created roughly four and a half centuries ago by Ivran Tol-Saroth, one of the greatest scholars to have ever lived. An exceptionally gifted Enchanter, Alchemist, Druid, and Warlock, he had used some unknown combination of eldritch and natural magic to breathe life into his furniture. A man of extreme solitude, he had created hundreds of house mimics to be his companions, assistants, and servants.

These critters had been born of good intentions and were innocent in their purpose. In fact, they had a powerful aversion to violence that prevented them from ever harming another sentient being, barring the occasional annoying vermin. Though that gnome called them cowards, it was far more accurate to say there were hardcore pacifists—creatures that would not attack another even if their lives depended on it. They were so far removed from the dungeon mimics of today, that both Keira and Lia couldn’t help

but start digging around the library to figure out how those violent boxes had come into existence.

That was how and why they learned of the dark history Jeremy had warned them about.

The Elven Dominion—the Ishigar Republic's predecessor at the time of Tol-Saroth—had been to blame for the violent 'deviation' of house mimics. Apparently, Queen Vasya the Last had made the phenomenal mistake of ordering the great sage to assist in her country's fight against the then-fledgling Lodrak Empire. This was a demand Tol-Saroth had refused outright. He had been an old and feeble man at the time, and had decided that spending his twilight years in peace and comfort was more important than appeasing the whims of some pompous monarch.

The queen had not taken this response lightly, and had retaliated by unleashing the power of a Phantasmal-grade magic item known as the Authority of the Crown. This immensely powerful, orb-shaped relic had been passed down from one member of the royal bloodline to the next. It bestowed upon its royal wielder ultimate power over any citizen of the Dominion. Queen Vasya had used this arcane relic to place a geas on Tol-Saroth that compelled him to obey her commands.

His free will stripped away, the once-great sage had been reduced to a mindless drone that slaved away to turn his peace-loving pets into tools of war. Dubbing them 'war mimics' (the old man had apparently been terrible at naming things) these alchemically-engineered monstrosities were designed to be merciless killing machines that craved human flesh. The thoughtless creatures would hibernate for extended periods of time, during which they would have the appearance of sturdy-yet-plain furniture.

The elf queen's spies would then smuggle these dormant killers into Imperial settlements. Once they had awoken from their slumbers, these war mimics would indiscriminately kill civilians. They had apparently been such formidable fighters a single one reportedly caused casualties in the hundreds, sometimes thousands, before they were finally killed or driven off. The whole thing had been a heartless campaign of terror that the queen hoped would crush the Empire's will to fight.

This clearly did not pan out as she had hoped, for the regent did not down in history as ‘Queen Vasya *the Last*’ without reason. Unbeknownst to her, Tol-Saroth had worked within the confines of his geas to sabotage the power-mad tyrant, much like a resentful familiar that had an easily-misinterpreted order. In her arrogance, Queen Vasya had used the Authority of the Crown to command Tol-Saroth to ‘assist her in wiping out the enemies of the elven people.’ The ruler had failed to consider that the great sage wholeheartedly believed the biggest threat to his people’s wellbeing had been the Dominion itself.

This had allowed him to work behind the scenes to quietly replace the vast majority of the royal palace’s furniture with camouflaged war mimics. Hundreds of these creatures had woken up almost simultaneously one evening, resulting in the total annihilation of the royal bloodline, along with their advisors, retainers, concubines, and elite guard. It was not known what had become of the Authority of the Crown, as the Phantasmal relic had disappeared seemingly without a trace during the fall of the palace.

The power vacuum left in the wake of Tol-Saroth’s vengeance eventually lead to the authoritarian monarchy’s total collapse. The once-great sage had, for better or for worse, *not* survived to see this happen. Numerous historical accounts state that, on the eve of the mimic-assisted coup, he had caused a devastating explosion that had gone down in history as ‘The Calamity of Tol-Saroth.’ The blast had scarred the land and poisoned the air in a manner eerily similar to what Boxxy had done at Monotal, though on a smaller scale. The original Calamity had resulted in the total obliteration of Tol-Saroth’s war mimic breeding facility, his research on the subject, and, depressingly enough, the great sage himself.

As for the war mimics left in his wake, they had continued to terrorize the countryside of both the Empire and the crumbling Dominion, though this hadn’t lasted long. While superbly durable and deadly, war mimics had shockingly low lifespans. This, combined with their inability to reproduce, led to the species going completely extinct within a few years.

It was a widely held belief by the modern academic community that these flaws were intentional rather than accidental. Tol-Saroth had gone down in history as a man possessing both a brilliant mind and inscrutable morals. A

person whose life's work had been focused on the betterment of society as a whole, never at the expense of an individual's life or personal freedom. It was not a tremendous leap of logic to assume that such a person had added planned obsolescence to the living weapons he had been forced to create. It certainly hadn't been accidental, as many of his original mimics were still alive to this day, over four centuries later.

Yet despite Tol-Saroth's measures and precautions, dungeon-born mimics like Boxxy still existed. Its particular subspecies began to appear in the decades following the sage's death. Officially known as 'Lesser' and 'Greater' Mimics, their kind seemed to be a halfway point between the docile house mimics and the relentlessly savage war mimics. Though the exact reasons behind this turn of events remained a mystery to this day, none could argue that the world would be a better place without this lasting mockery of a great man's legacy.

Lia closed the book in front of her with a glum expression, while Keira and Rowana looked on in disbelief. This simple, curious inquiry into Minic's origins had brought to light a somewhat obscure but nevertheless tragic piece of history. One could argue they could've quit while they were ahead, but a certain shapeshifter's insistence had them see this inquiry to its bitter end. Admittedly the story was full of holes, speculation, and assumptions, but it also was a miracle that even this much had survived those turbulent times.

"Our ancestors did some terrible things," the elf Ranger sighed.

"This is… unbelievable. Are we sure these books are accurate?" Rowana asked with desperate hope that this had all been a big lie.

"Please don't even suggest that. This library is normally exclusive to members of the Consortium," Lia frowned. "Adventurers live and die based on the accuracy of information they receive, so I have no doubt these materials are genuine. There's even some books here that are not publicly available and require special authorization to access, likely due to the sensitive information they hold."

"The humans are not entirely blameless, either," Keira interjected. "If not for their warlike attitude, none of that would've happened."

Those were just empty words to move the conversation along. As the one who was the most concerned with these revelations, Boxxy didn't know what to think. Learning about its origins was harder to stomach than it had expected. It suddenly made sense why it craved human flesh. Granted, it would not turn down the odd elf or dwarf, but humanity was the ultimate delicacy, the race it wanted to devour the most. This was also probably the reason Lia smelled tastier than other elves, as she had stated that her mother was born of a human father and an elf mother. Although the resulting children of such couplings were always the same race as the mother, they still carried some of the father's genes and traits. Boxxy's preferences were so pronounced that it could quite literally smell the traces of humanity that were passed down to Lia from her grandfather.

Honestly, the idea that some ancient elf was the source of its instincts was more than a little infuriating. Having grown up in a dungeon, the then-mimic had sworn to itself that it would not let anything or anyone control it like that ever again. As it turned out, it had been influenced by some long-dead, pointy-eared asshole from hundreds of years ago this whole time.

"Yip?"

Minic, who sat idly on the table the entire time, was apparently a remnant of Tol-Saroth's original legacy. Boxxy had the sudden urge to crush this creature there and then, but that whim subsided almost as quickly as it came. This creature wasn't to blame. If anything, it was a victim. The wannabe-catgirl stretched its hands out and hugged the small creature. Not to restrain it, as it had done initially, but as it out of some bizarre feeling bordering empathy. Rowana embraced her solemn-looking girlfriend from the side in an effort to comfort her. Lia had the same intention, though she felt awkward about touching the couple and instead stroked Minic's lid.

"Those poor creatures," Rowana mumbled. "Mimics, I mean. Bred to know nothing but violence and made to kill others until they expire. I can't even imagine what horrible fate had-"

"Rowana, don't get the wrong idea," Lia interrupted her. "Mimics are monsters. Regardless of their origins, they are vile, vicious, and delight in the suffering of elves and humans alike. They have no loyalty, no

compassion and would not hesitate to eat you on sight without a single shred of remorse. Do not spare them any pity, they're not worth it."

"I see… yes, you're right."

"If you're still going to feel bad about any of them, then be sure to make yourself feel better by spoiling this little guy rotten."

"Yeah!"

"Thanks, Lia," Keira said in a low voice. "I really needed to hear that."

These were Boxxy's honest feelings. Although her words were meant to be a cautionary speech for Rowana not to ever feel sympathy for a monster, they also became a surprisingly effective pep-talk for the doppelganger. Boxxy realized that it didn't need to doubt itself or try to change its homicidal ways. It knew who and what it was, and it wasn't going to let some centuries-old story change that. Besides, it was now intelligent enough to suppress any and all instincts that Tol-Saroth fellow had given it and its predecessors. Therefore, rather than feel conflicted about its past, it chose to focus on its future and redouble its efforts in the acquisition of both tasty and shiny things.

"C'mon, let's get out of here," it offered, and the other two agreed. The three of them returned all the books they had borrowed to their shelves and went their separate ways. The couple's day out on the town had taken an unexpected turn, but it was hardly the waste of time Boxxy had expected it to be.

There had been one more point of interest in Tol-Saroth's story. It was a piece of trivia the shapeshifter was quite surprised to learn, but one that made sense in retrospect. That elf had had many Jobs, but the main one had been that of a Warlock. Although his exact Levels had been lost to history, his biography stated that he was known for having three different familiars under his command, a clear sign of a nearly maxed-out Demonology Skill. This meant the 'Warlock magic' stated in the history books likely referred to the reality-warping energies of the Beyond. In other words, all mimics, Boxxy included, likely had a quasi-demonic origin. Perhaps that had been why it got along with its contracted familiars so well, and also why the Goddess of Impossibilities had such an interest in the creature.

That hadn’t been the surprising thing, though. The tidbit that piqued Boxxy’s interest had been the recorded descriptions of the ancient elf’s demonic familiars. Although their names weren’t known, their appearances and actions were. The first two had been a beholder and a fiend, which he had used as a research assistant and bodyguard, respectively. They were ultimately unimportant, as it was the third and final one that caught Boxxy’s attention. She was described as a succubus with the expected nubile proportions. One that had light-blue skin, glowing pink eyes, waist-long hair the color of the night sky, two golden curved horns on either side of her head, and a pair of large red bat-like wings sprouting from her back. These traits were typical for thousands of cerulean succubi, and if it was just for these, Boxxy would not have given this matter a second thought.

However, it couldn’t help but notice the accounts of this particular demon’s exploits suggested she had a manic tendency for burning things to the ground whenever the opportunity presented itself.

Part Three

“Oh, yeah! There was a guy who had furniture like that!” exclaimed Xera.

“Really? That’s all you can say about him?” asked Boxxy.

“Forgive me, Master. It’s just that I really did not care about my masters before I met you, so they all sort of blur together.”

The succubus had a point. Typically speaking, demons didn’t exactly hold mortals in high regard. Even if she was contracted to Tol-Saroth, it didn’t mean she paid much attention to the man.

“Can you at least tell me what he was like?”

“Let’s see… He was insane, the boring kind. He would obsess over one project or another and lock himself in his workshop. He’d usually leave us familiars in the Beyond and only call us out to guard the house and look after his pets. He was also super gay. Never got so much as a semi no matter how many times I thrust my breasts in his face or sensually caressed his back.”

“What about after the Dominion got in his head and forced him to breed living weapons?”

“Did that happen?”

“You tell me.”

“Hmm, he did move to some gloomy mega-tower or something with a whole bunch of other old, boring, scholarly types. I really didn’t pay much attention, but it was fun to see him rip his hair out from all the stress and frustration. It was fun up until he detonated that dungeon core he was experimenting on.”

So it would seem this was what Snack had alluded to when she said she knew what a ‘catastrophic meltdown’ was all those months ago.

“What about the creation of mimics?”

“No idea, Master. Like I said, he did all his research and experiments cooped up in his lab. All I know is his furniture suddenly started moving

around and trying to bite me at some point."

"And your personal opinion on him?"

"Well, I suppose he knew how to ruin someone's day with Ruin magic. That was fun to watch. I think he's also where I picked up my staff-twirling habits from, actually. They don't really do anything, but they're kinda fun. Huh, I guess he wasn't *too* bad a master, all things considered. Not nearly as great as you, though."

"I see."

Her words weren't particularly helpful or insightful, but they were somewhat informative. The only reason the doppelganger questioned her about its ancestors' creator was out of curiosity rather than necessity, so this much was enough.

"I'll be coming by the dungeon later. Stand by the core until then."

"Understood, Master."

Boxxy cut off the telepathic communication and walked out of the restroom.

"All done, Keira?" asked Rowana with an idle smile.

"Yup!"

The shapeshifter had found out the hard way just how difficult it was to maintain its cover while talking to its minions, Ambrosia included. Splitting its attention between physical and mental conversations was difficult, so it decided it was better to excuse itself for a while rather than space out in the middle of a conversation.

"Where's Lia?" it asked while looking around.

"Ah, she said she had to run, something about helping her father in the inn."

"Oh, right. She did say she wasn't going to stick around long. How's Minic?"

"Mmm, hugging it like this is a bit uncomfortable, but the little guy seems happy enough so I don't mind."

"Yip!"

The mini-mimic gave a small happy-sounding yelp from in between the elf's arms. She held it against her well-shaped breasts as if it were a precious book, and the tiny creature seemed to thoroughly enjoy the soft sensation pressing against its underside. Boxxy's own undercarriage had been relatively sensitive during its mimic days, so it understood where Minic was coming from. It also made a mental note to get the little guy a soft pillow to sit on in the future. A cheap one.

"Well, I think that's enough excitement for one day. Shall we get home, sweetie?" offered Rowana.

"Sure," Keira agreed.

The two of them proceeded to walk down the road while chatting away happily about inconsequential stuff. Boxxy just smiled and nodded for the most part. It realized that Keira really did not have any hobbies beyond being a Ranger, which was perhaps a flaw in her character. It was common for adventurers to pick up a secondary Job, typically a craft-focused one that synergized with their combat-oriented profession. Perhaps this was a good opportunity to make Keira's Artificer Job public.

Actually no, it was still too early for that. Faehorn told all his students to put off on acquiring a second Job until they surpassed Level 25 of their Ranger Job. After that, he recommended they look into Alchemist, Rogue, or Monster Tamer, as those had high compatibility with the bow-wielding Ranger. It made Boxxy giggle a bit on the inside. A monster with the Monster Tamer Job sounded so ironic that it almost wanted to give that a try for the fun of it. That would be a waste of time though, as the former mimic's ability and willingness to look after living creatures was quite non-existent.

Besides, Keira would definitely go after the Artificer Job when the time came, and would be aided by a very capable teacher she happened to meet and become friends with after a certain joint training lesson. Speaking of which, Boxxy considered it had to be very careful in regards to what Jobs it got in the future. This wariness stemmed from something it learned quite recently as part of its adventuring studies. Namely, the unwritten rule that an individual could only hold a limited number of Jobs at any time.

This number seemed to vary between various races. Elves, for example, could have as many as eight, while dwarves and gnomes were a bit lower at seven. Humans, on the other hand, could get all the way up to ten and beastkin were limited to six. It was normally hard to find a person who held more than four or five different jobs, so it wasn't much of an issue for most people. It was, however, an issue for Boxxy. The Consortium's library had no information regarding the maximum number of Jobs a monster could possess, but records showed Appraisals of creatures that had at least as many as humans. After all, a monster could Rank Up many times during its lifespan, and every new Rank Up could come with a new Job. It seemed logical that they would have more Job slots available every time they evolved into a different species.

The take-away from that was that each creature had a hard Job limit. Even if Boxxy didn't presently know its own cap, that still meant the garbage-tier Cat Job was taking up a valuable slot. Both the Attribute bonuses this Job and the effects of its single Skill, Feline Agility, were extremely lackluster. It was also impossible to advance beyond Level 5, likely because Boxxy was not of a feline species.

Boxxy had already looked into whether a Scribe could clean up its Status, but that seemed impossible. The monster would need to find someone who was both capable of Appraising Cat Job and wouldn't ask questions about how an adventurer would have such a thing. It was also out of the question to try and learn the Scribe Job for itself because doing so involved subjecting itself to regular an anti-shapeshifter shock test as a precaution against doppelgangers. Additionally, judging from what it had heard about it, trying to Level Up the Scribe Job was a maddeningly slow and boring process.

Therefore, Boxxy was stuck with being part cat, at least for the time being. It would need to be very careful regarding Job acquisition in the future, lest it accidentally ruin its chances at Ranking Up into an even more powerful species. The shapeshifter had also been more selective with its Cadaver Absorption targets, as it was wary of being stranded with another subpar Job.

"Keira? You're spacing out again."

“Oh, sorry Rowie. I was just thinking about the future,” the redhead replied. “*Our* future.”

“Oh! Oh my! I-I-I’m flattered, but I- Uhm, I mean… I think it’s a bit too early to be thinking about m-m-marr- Oof!”

Just then, someone bumped into Rowana with a lot of force in a move that Boxxy realized was clearly on purpose. It deftly moved as Keira to catch the platinum-blonde elf before she hit the ground. The man that knocked her over just kept running away at a dead sprint.

“Hey, watch it, pal!” Keira yelled after him, before turning her attention back to Rowana. “Huh? Wait, where’s Minic?”

“Ah! I must’ve dropped him in the- Oh, no. That guy stole him!”

Oh! It’s the fabled ‘hit-and-run’ pickpocket! Boxxy exclaimed internally. *So that’s how that works, eh?*

The monster was rather impressed with the thief’s technique. It was almost a shame that the stupid piece of meat thought that it could steal one of Boxxy T. Morningwood’s belongings.

“Wait here.”

“K-Keira?”

Rowana stared up at her girlfriend, slightly taken aback by the cold hatred in her voice and eyes. Boxxy noticed her reaction and realized that its animosity had momentarily slipped through its facade, prompting it to try and cover up for the mistake.

“Look, I’m sorry. I have to go get it back. I won’t let anyone take something precious from me ever again.”

There was more truth in those words than Boxxy intended, but they had the right effect.

“Oh-okay,” the elf stammered. “I get it, just go. And be careful!”

“I always am.”

The woman felt a bit relieved when she saw the same reassuring smile Keira always gave her, and watched the beastkin take off into the crowd on

all fours. Having somehow salvaged the situation, Boxxy turned its attention towards the cloaked figure that attempted to rob it. It had already moved beyond its magical perception range and blended into the crowd, but it wasn't a problem. The apprentice Ranger already had the scent of its target, and the Tracking Skill highlighted the man's trail, illuminating his footprints in a soft glow that only Boxxy could see.

The beastkin ran through the crowds with reckless abandon as per usual, going in between legs, through stalls and over carts. Eventually, she turned into a side alley, which had some old crates and jars strewn about.

"Shit. What the fuck is this?" an agitated voice came from behind a pile of trash.

"Yap! Yap!" a squeaky voice protested in response.

It would appear the thief had just realized that the an expensive-looking ornate jewelry box he had stolen was, in fact, a living being.

"Ah, whatever. That jewel should be worth something at least."

He reached behind his belt and took out a small knife, clearly intending to carve the expensive-looking thing out of the struggling house mimic.

"Hands off, asshole!"

The still-in-character catgirl ran up to him while he was distracted and slashed his forearm with her retractable claws.

"Gah! The fuck?!"

It didn't do a lot of damage and the cut was rather shallow, but it still caused the hooded elf to stagger backwards and drop the panicking box. Having obtained its freedom, Minic quickly ran away from the scary person and hid behind its far more ferocious 'cousin.'

"You got some nerve trying to steal other people's pets!" Keira accused the man.

"You'll regret that, you little tramp!"

The man swung at the catgirl with more speed than she was expecting. Judging from his movements, he must have been around a Level 30 or 35

Job holder. Most likely a Rogue, which was unsurprisingly common among pickpockets, thieves, burglars, and other ne'er-do-wells. He was hardly a threat to a monster of Boxxy's caliber, but the shapeshifter was currently undercover. Objectively speaking, there was no way a Level 14 Ranger would be able to defeat a Level 30-something Rogue in close quarters. Especially when the former was an unarmed teenager and the latter was an adult male holding a rather big knife.

Of course, none of that would matter so long as the beastkin hadn't been the one to fight this hoodlum.

A shadowy figure suddenly dropped down in the path of the advancing Rogue, hiding Keira from the thug's view. The interloper's long, flowing cloak obscured his body and a face wrap concealed his face and head. He appeared to be a man with naturally wide shoulders and slightly over two meters in height. Armored boots skidded across the ground and a pair of metal-clad hands burst out of the billowing garment, grabbing hold of the startled thief's arm and collar. The stranger then slammed the elf against the nearby wall and pressed the edge of his own blade against the thief's throat. The poor sod looked into his attacker's unnaturally yellow eyes, which seemed to glow from inside his mask.

The street thug proceeded to liberally soil his undergarments as a wave of terror unlike anything he had ever experienced washed over his entire being.

"Huehaahaaehaeeheaaeheaaa!"

The much-larger man let out a disjointed, inhuman laugh that sounded like an entire pack of hyenas choking to death.

"What's going on here?!"

A loud, commanding voice came in from the entrance to the alley. A group of eight people approached in matching silver-plated armor with an eagle-wing motif decorating their shoulder plates and helmets. They were part of Azurvale's city guard, most likely a patrol that had come to investigate who could be raising such a ruckus in this dingy little alley. The cloaked figure threw a glance at them over his shoulder, then clambered up the side of the

building and disappeared over the rooftops in a formidable display of agility. As for the Rogue, he was left behind curled up on the ground.

Well, most of him, anyway.

“Aarrgh! My arrrm! Grrraaaar!”

He screamed and roared as blood flowed out of the stump on his right hand, which was ripped clean off his wrist when his assailant retreated.

“Medic, quickly!” the man in the fanciest-looking helmet bellowed orders. “Jammie, watch the girl! The rest of you, up those rooftops!”

The patrol flew into a frenzy as they complied. The leader and medic attended to the wounded thief, while a third one told Keira to sit by and not make any sudden moves. The other five deftly clambered up the walls, despite their heavy-looking armor. They returned a few minutes later, carrying only the stranger’s discarded cloak and mask, claiming he vanished into thin air just when they thought they had caught up to him.

The would-be-thief, the catgirl, and her pet box with teeth were then taken into custody and questioned. Keira merely told the truth—she was walking home with her ‘roommate’ when that guy tried to rob them. She chased after him using her natural agility and Ranger Skills, then foolishly confronted him in the alley. She then realized she was outmatched and would’ve been stabbed for sure if that mysterious fellow hadn’t intervened.

“So, you did not know the supposed thief?” the guard continued interrogating her.

“No. I’ve never seen him before in my life.”

“Hmm… Alright, what about the man who intervened?”

“Same. He just dropped in out of nowhere. If it wasn’t for him…”

The shapeshifter pretended to regret its own recklessness, hence why Keira made that ‘it’s all my fault’ face while looking at the ground.

“Indeed, you’re lucky he showed up. Otherwise you could have been seriously hurt.”

“I know. Do you have any idea who that was?”

“None of your business, miss.”

“Please? I just want to know who I have to thank for saving me from my own stupidity.”

The adorable catgirl’s sincere demeanor made the soldier’s eyes swim for a bit. The effects of Boxxy’s unseen Charisma (CHR) Attribute coupled with its attractive outward appearance meant that it was easy to lull people into a false sense of security with the right attitude. This again was something that Snack had demonstrated many times over the past month or so.

“… Look, officially we’re told not to deny his existence,” said the guard in a hushed tone, “but I think that was the Sandman from the rumors.”

“Wait, he’s real?”

“Shh! Keep your voice down, girl.”

“Oh. Right, sorry.”

“Anyway, yeah, he’s real. They say he’s been dismantling gangs and cartels throughout the city, but it also seems he’s not above stomping a few street thugs along the way.”

“… But?” she asked pointedly.

“But, he’s still a criminal. There’s no telling how many innocents were caught up in his... business, so I urge you to stay away from him.”

“I see. Okay, I’ll keep that in mind. Thanks a lot for sharing this with me, mister guard.”

Keira flashed a radiant smile reminiscent of a sunflower in full bloom. It made the middle-aged elf cough lightly with embarrassment. The catgirl in front of him was so adorable that he found himself wanting to hug her, pat her head, and scratch her fuzzy ears, though not in a lecherous way. She just seemed like the sort of cute daughter that any father would be proud of. However, the guard recognized such behavior as inappropriate and unbecoming of an older man, especially a public servant and peacekeeper.

“You’re welcome, missy. Just keep it between us, okay? My boss will yell at me if I he learned I went around saying stuff like that. What I said was just hearsay and speculation, nothing more.”

“You got it, mister guard. It’ll be our little secret.”

She gave the guard a small wink with a finger against her thin lips, making him almost unable to bear it. This girl was downright dangerous, almost as if someone had tried to weaponize cuteness itself. Which was, more or less, the case.

As for the guard’s guess regarding the beastkin’s ‘savior,’ he had been only partially correct. That particular ‘Sandman’ had been a Mirror Image prepared by Boxxy. The shapeshifter had noticed the armed patrol and their shiny armor just before it had followed the thief into the alleyway. It seemed likely they would interfere, so it chose to remain in character while letting its body double take all the ‘credit’ for thwarting the theft. Not only did this divert attention and suspicion away from Keira, but it was also the first time that the rumored vigilante had left so many witnesses behind. Even if the office of the city guard wanted to keep the Sandman’s existence under wraps, they would be unable to stop so many people from blabbing about him now.

Then, once Boxxy’s darker alter ego had obtained a certain amount of notoriety and reputation, it would offer its services to the right people. Preferably those with few scruples, lots of money, and a good amount of influence. It was only natural there would be some government official or affluent individual who required something taken care of quickly and quietly… for a nominal fee, of course. The shapeshifter had no issue providing its services to the highest bidder, but it had to build up the Sandman as a meticulous and brutally efficient professional.

With the interview over, the guard escorted Keira out of the building. Rowana had been patiently waiting for her in the lobby with Minic, both of whom seemed relieved she was alright. The elf scolded her a bit for being reckless while the animate box excitedly bumped against her ankles. It would appear that, even though it had the intelligence of a rusty doorknob, the house mimic understood that the redhead had saved it from a dangerous situation.

[Congratulations, you are now a Level 14 Doppelganger! All Attributes +2.]

Boxxy cheered internally at the Level Up as the couple and their new pet proceeded happily towards their love nest. They got home without further incident, had a modest dinner of vegetable soup and performed their nightly dose of lovemaking and cuddling before Rowana fell asleep in Keira's arms. The catgirl waited a bit to make sure she was completely out of it, before wriggling out of bed and exchanging places with Xera through use of the Transfamiliar Spell. The succubus would keep an eye on Rowana and make sure she didn't wake up and notice Keira's absence. Xera was under orders to only use the Sleep Spell, and to avoid activating the Dreamweaver Skill unless absolutely necessary. Repeated use of the Skill made it unreliable, and Boxxy didn't want a repeat of what had happened with Fizzy prior to their capture by Edward, the Empire's Spymaster.

"'Tis good to see thee again, milord."

Upon returning to the dungeon, Ambrosia greeted Boxxy with an overjoyed smile.

"Yeah, it's good to be back," it replied as it transformed from its true doppelganger shape into a spider-legged chest.

Boxxy still wasn't sure why or how, but the Transfamiliar Spell forcefully undid its shapeshifting. If other teleportation-type Spells had the same effect, then that might prove to be a big problem. Especially since the people of the Republic relied on those gigantic circular Forest Gates to transport goods and people across large distances in an instant. It was highly likely that Boxxy would need to use them at some point. The fact that the use of those Gates use was strictly regulated and supervised meant it couldn't just test it out at its leisure, either. Then again, the Transfamiliar Spell supposedly functioned using different principles from standard spatial magic, so it was likely this shapeshifting thing was a quirk unique to that particular incantation.

Putting its worries aside for the moment, the box began inspecting the workshop that Fizzy had set up with the dungeon core's functions. A large, rectangular room had been carved into the side of the tree's inner wall through Terrain Sculpting, and was easily accessible from the platform where the dungeon core resided. It had only three walls, meaning there was

no doorway or anything to separate the workshop from the rest of the open space.

Inside was a large stone furnace, as well as three anvils of different make and material. A myriad of tools lined the walls alongside a plethora of shelves, boxes and display cases. These containers stood vacant, ready to be filled with all kinds of components, parts and mechanisms. There was also a long wooden table attached to the left wall, opposite the furnace. This would probably serve as Fizzy's workstation. In fact, she seemed to have already started working on something if the lump of casings, screws and wires on the table was any indication.

"Was all of this made through Item Allocation and Terrain Sculpting?"

"'Tis so, milord. These tools and facilities were created and maintained through the core, although they require a small amount of upkeep to keep them operational."

"Hmm, I suppose that much is fine then. What about using dungeon-created materials to Level Up the Job? Did Fizzy try that?"

"Indeed she did, milord. Unfortunately, it did not seem to be sufficient. 'Tis the reason she is currently away procuring materials at this time."

"Well, that was to be expected."

Temporary things born of pure mana did not provide a permanent boost to one's Job or Skill Levels. It was an unwritten rule of this world. Using magically-created tools was probably okay though, just so long as the materials used came from outside the dungeon.

"Oh! That reminds me, I hath some more good news regarding milady Fizzy's position, milord," Ambrosia declared enthusiastically. "Thine servant hath discovered the dungeon is capable of creating a Bracelet of Allegiance, a magical item that identifies anyone who wears it as a friend to the dungeon. I hath taken the liberty of preparing one for milady Fizzy upon her return."

The dryad pointed towards a small pedestal that stood just outside the magically-created Artificer workshop. On it was a thin steel bangle with a tiny, glowing gem embedded into it. Boxxy couldn't help but notice that

this precious stone looked a lot like a miniature version of the dungeon core. Unfortunately, as shiny as it was, this thing would most likely vanish into thin air if it were taken outside the dungeon's sphere of influence. On the upside, if what Ambrosia said was true, then the Dryad's Domain would finally stop treating Fizzy as a hostile invader.

"I see. Very convenient," the shapeshifter declared sagely. "Hm? Where's Arms?"

"Thy many-limbed servant is currently assisting this one," the tree spirit informed it. "I hath found a new nest of pests that hath burrowed themselves into mine bark, and she is currently evicting them."

"… These 'pests' are termites and not elves, right?"

"Of course, milord. This one would rather not harm the favored of Nyrie if it could be avoided. They art responsible for carrying this one's fruits and seeds throughout the land and raising mine offspring in safety. In return I provide them with shelter and nourishment. 'Tis a mutually beneficial relationship, though I do wish they would refrain from peeling at mine bark so much."

"Okay, that's good."

The last thing Boxxy needed right now was to worry about authorities investigating this tree's interior because some people went missing.

"What if they came into the dungeon portion of your body?"

"Then this one would ask them to leave. Or force them to if they refused."

"That's naive, Ambrosia!" it reprimanded her.

"How so?"

"Dungeons are known to hold valuables and treasures. If word got out that your body had become home to one, it would lead to all sorts of greedy individuals attacking the dungeon in an attempt to plunder its riches! You wouldn't want that, right?"

"Heavens no, milord! Just the thought of that happening is… extremely unpleasant. Then, what doth milord suggest I do with such miscreants?"

“Capture them alive and prevent them from leaving here. You should be able to do that much without relying on Prison Management, yes?”

“‘Tis so, milord. I can imprison them in cages made of mine roots and branches and sustain them with mine fruits for as long as need be. But, what would that accomplish? Surely ‘tis better to just kill them and use them as fertilizer, no?”

“That is also naive! The absence of certain people is sure to be noticed, which would mean those elves would send even more people to investigate their disappearance. The end result would be no different than simply letting them go.”

“Ah! Thou speaketh truly!”

“But worry not, for Snack and I are on your side. We’ll be sure to handle those intruders in a way that will not draw attention to this place! If they’re unimportant and will not be missed, they will be eaten. If they are regular citizens or people of importance, then we can tamper with their memory or cover up this place’s existence in some other way.”

“I see! Milord’s wisdom belies thy age! I shalt engrave thy words unto mine heartwood.”

Ambrosia took a deep bow while her emerald-green eyes shone with respect. As expected, she was completely oblivious to the relationships between dungeons and adventurers, so Boxxy wanted to make a good impression on her. It was insurance should the dungeon core’s influence weaken in the future. If the dryad were to somehow reclaim her wits, then she will have memories of being treated as a partner rather than a slave. This would hopefully be enough to douse her ire when and if this occurred.

Now that Boxxy thought about it, why *did* dungeons exist in the first place? There were honestly very little benefits to the owner beyond making it a safe place to live. How come dungeons seemed to invite and tempt others into them? Was it because the vast majority of these places were apparently under the control of one God or another?

Thinking back to the Litigar Dungeon Complex, that place was definitely made for the enjoyment of the Goddess of Improbabilities. The fact that she

immediately contacted Boxxy and offered to make it the dungeon master showed she actively kept an eye on things through the Surveillance Net. And yet, the Spire of the Jade King was far less responsive, suggesting the place had not been of significant importance to its owner. It was therefore logical that owning a dungeon was not vital for those deities. Perhaps dungeons were simply a means to test the resolve and mettle of mortals? Something like 'prove you are worthy and claim the power you deserve' type of thing? It certainly seemed like the sort of thing a god or goddess would do.

Well, one thing was for sure—Boxxy would definitely not reward any invaders for breaking into its lair with the intent of robbing it blind. In fact, now that Fizzy would be seen as the dungeon's ally, it could fill the place with even more traps. It particularly looked forward to testing out those booby-trapped treasure chests it could build through Trap Management. Not to mention the anti-flight countermeasures it had installed all over this chasm last night.

"Arms, are you still busy cleaning out that termite nest?" it called out telepathically.

"Hey, Boss, and yeah, I am. It's taking longer than I thought, but I'm almost done."

Kora lacked Xera's wide-area fire magic, so she was probably doing it by hand. Both her Berserker and Fiend Jobs made her extremely well suited to crushing little things in rapid succession. She was probably having a blast, especially since her Violent Meditation Skill restored a tiny bit of her MP whenever she hit something, which allowed her to use her Skills and Martial Arts a lot more often.

And while she was scarily effective against many squishy targets, she was no less capable of taking down tough, armored opponents since she got her Resonating Blows Skill. Using that, she could send destructive shockwaves that penetrated an opponent's defenses and ripped their insides to shreds. They were strong enough to rattle even Fizzy's highly durable mithril frame provided she actually got a good hit on her. That golem had gotten even better at avoiding, blocking, and parrying attacks than she was prior to becoming a golem. Her mithril frame was highly resistant to damage, but

neither the Paladin nor the shapeshifter wanted to see it scratched up, stained, or dented.

On the whole, Boxxy was superbly pleased with the progress of all of its minions, and its mood only soared further in anticipation of the evening's main event.

"Meet me at the highest point of dungeon with Nexus Access when you're done," it commanded.

"You got it, boss!" the fiend hollered back. "We're doing the thing, tonight, right?!"

"That's right."

Tonight was the night of a Lunar Convergence, during which all three of Terrania's moons would be visible in the sky. It was time to see whether this Unholy Wealth thing was all that it was cracked up to be. Not only was the result of the ritual of immense interest to the greedy monster, but performing it was also highly likely to earn Boxxy the last chunk of Demonology Proficiency needed to hit Level 8. This would, in turn, allow it to contract a third familiar. All in all, if things worked out as intended, Boxxy's hoard and

"Yip yip!"

But first, it would have to do something about the yipping jewelry box currently running frantically between its legs.

Part Four

Boxxy stared inquisitively at the slightly hyperactive house mimic. The little guy had no idea what was going on, and seemed genuinely excited about its new owner's current chesty disposition. As for how it had gotten here, the shapeshifter remembered vaguely feeling something bump into its leg just as it had finished invoking the Transfamiliar Spell. It now realized that must have been Minic, who had somehow hitched a ride, as it were. It then must have spent a few moments recovering from the Spell's mildly disorienting effects before it started running around like an overstimulated puppy.

This sequence of events baffled Boxxy quite a bit, mostly because it had no idea that Transfamiliar could be used to transport multiple living things at the same time. The thought had crossed its mind, but it had avoided testing it out for fear of what might happen to one or both parties. Still, it now had confirmation that using the Spell in such a way was both possible and safe, which was sure to prove useful should such a thing become necessary in the future.

A much more troubling thought crept into Boxxy's mind. Both the monster and the dryad had completely failed to detect Minic's presence. Admittedly it had temporarily disabled the intruder alarm because of Fizzy, but surely the dungeon master would have seen it before it started yapping and running around. Even if not, she could clearly both see and hear it now, yet the dryad showed no reaction whatsoever.

"Ambrosia," it decided to ask, "why haven't you said anything about this creature?"

"What doth thy mean, milord?" the dumbfounded tree spirit replied. "'Tis one of thy servants, is it not?"

"Well, it is, but shouldn't you be more concerned with a new intruder?"

"Hmm… Thou art correct. 'Tis most bizarre now that I think of it. While this creature is undoubtedly an invader, I find myself unwilling to harm it. Almost as if… No, I am certain."

Ambrosia knelt down in front of Boxxy and patted her thighs, prompting Minic to stop whatever it was doing and leap into her lap with a few high-pitched yelps.

“This creature was definitely carved from mine timber,” the dryad said with a gentle smile.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Absolutely,” she insisted. “‘Tis difficult to put mine feelings into words, but I know for certain.”

That would certainly explain her lack of animosity. Though the dungeon core exerted some amount of influence over the dryad, it did not control her most basic instincts. If Ambrosia saw Minic as part of herself, or maybe even as an offspring of sorts, then it was only natural she would not want to hurt it. More importantly, her words also revealed the fact that the small mimic had a shell made out of actual wood rather than flesh disguised as wood. This seemed obvious now that Ambrosia pointed this out, yet Boxxy had glossed over this despite having examined the critter’s insides multiple times with its MLG.

This bothered the shapeshifter. It felt as if it should have already noticed the fact that, now that it thought about it, Minic seemed more like a box that had been brought to life rather than a lifeform disguised as a box. Admittedly, Boxxy had more important things to worry about than its new pet’s biology, but it couldn’t shake the feeling that something was off. Perhaps the house mimic had some kind of Skill that made it easier for the creature to avoid one’s notice?

The chest-shaped doppelganger then realized this was a good opportunity to test out a certain feature of the core’s Surveillance Net. The module in question could perform an Invader Analysis, which seemed to be halfway between a Basic Appraisal and a full one. Though it wouldn’t reveal Skills or Perks, it was still enough to gauge a living being’s strength. Boxxy hastily brought up the relevant screens and menus, and activated the function in question. Minic sensed something was going on and jumped out of Ambrosia’s lap with a surprised “Yip!” It calmed down a few seconds later.

Once that was over, Boxxy was left looking at a truly bizarre Status screen.

[General Information]
Minic
House Mimic, 462 years old
Servant of the Household of Tol-Saroth
Level 2.00 Doppelganger (MAX)
Level 2.00 Mimic (MAX)
Level 5.00 Demonspawn (MAX)
275/275 HP (+0.5/sec)
0/0 MP

[Attributes]
STR 25, DEX 25, AGI 25, END 50, LCK 2048

One thing was abundantly clear—there was now zero doubt that this creature was one of Tol-Saroth's original house mimics. Judging from this Status, it had been created through some sort of fusion between a doppelganger and a demon. It was also quite a bit tougher than its appearance would suggest. However, the lack of INT and WIS and that truly outrageous LCK Attribute hinted at an untellable tale of hardship. The fact this creature had survived for four-and-a-half centuries while being the living embodiment of dumb luck was… incredible. The demonic energies that were used in its creation were also likely the cause of its unnatural longevity. Familiars' physical forms did not age, after all.

Another thing that was obvious, Minic truly lacked the capacity of comprehending its surroundings as anything more complex than 'good things' and 'bad things.' This meant it was not actually a threat to its operation. Even if it somehow understood that Keira had a secret identity, it completely lacked the ability to communicate such a thing. It was physically incapable of spilling the beans. Not to mention that its bright red gem and lustrous golden trim made it uniquely shiny, which appealed greatly to Boxxy's tastes.

Ultimately the doppelganger decided to keep the amusing little box, at least for the time being.

"Ambrosia, can you keep Minic here company for a while?"

“It would be mine pleasure, milord.”

She bent down and picked up the animate jewelry box, which immediately nuzzled itself between her breasts. Come to think of it, it did that a lot with Rowana and Lia, but not so much with Keira. This trend suggested that Minic, for whatever reason, seemed to prefer bustier women. Admittedly, it wasn’t Boxxy’s place to fault another for their love of large chests, but that was clearly the wrong type of chest the former mimic had in mind. That aside, the important part was that Minic seemed content to sit tight rather than run around and interfere with Boxxy’s plans.

Using Nexus Access, Boxxy instantly transported itself to the highest point of the dungeon. It was still within the tree, so it used Terrain Sculpting to make its way out of it, much like before. It broke through the bark and found itself standing in the lush canopy of the hylt tree. The outrageously sized branches and leaves blocked out the view of the night sky. This was an issue, since the ritual Boxxy wanted to perform required an unobstructed line of sight to all three moons.

It therefore started climbing upwards, looking through the sea of branches and leaves for a suitable ritual site. It took several minutes until it found a relatively flat branch with a clear view of the night sky. Yoitis, Laopra and Tascuna—the three moons orbiting the world of Terrania—were the only things visible overhead. The moons’ combined light was so intense that it completely drowned out the stars, as if they were intentionally hogging the celestial stage.

“Boss, I’m done with the termites,” came Kora’s timely report. “I’m on my way to... Ah, you’re out of the dungeon. I can’t get to you with Nexus Access.”

“That’s okay, I’ll just re-summon you.”

Yes, this would cost a sizeable chunk of MP, but it wasn’t as if it had anything else to spend in on. After dismissing and recalling Kora to its side, it started recalling the steps and materials it would need to perform the long-anticipated Unholy Wealth ritual. It did so with a bit of apprehension, however, as it was once again reminded that it didn’t know what the outcome would be. Yes, the Demonology Skill taught it all it needed to

know to perform the ceremony, but that was it. Neither Arms nor Snack knew anything about it either, and Boxxy hadn't been able to figure out how to research the topic as Keira without raising eyebrows.

The only thing it could determine was that the Ritual of Unholy Wealth would produce a magic item of some kind. How much harm could an inanimate object truly do?

Its mind made up, Boxxy opened its Storage and started pulling out all of the ingredients and tools necessary for the ceremony. The more mundane materials consisted of: a standard silver-plated mortar and pestle set, a small hammer, five gold coins, and a plain wooden goblet carved out of oak. The rarer and subsequently more expensive ingredients included an Elixir of Avarice, a six-centimeter-long mithril nail, an unprocessed Midnight Ruby, and a Pure Pearl that had been tainted by demonic essence.

There was a bit of an issue with that last one, however. Boxxy had obtained the component during its stay in Erosa, but the magical gemstone had reverted to its pure state over the long months it had sat inside the monster's Storage. The shapeshifter was aware of this, which was why it needed Kora's assistance. It handed her the gemstone, and told her to infuse it with her essence.

"Do what now?" the fiend asked incredulously.

"Infuse it with your essence," it repeated.

"How do I do that?"

"It's like pumping mana into it as you would into a magic item."

"Oh…"

"You don't know how to do that either, do you?"

"Nope."

Boxxy was briefly taken aback by this. Arms might not have been the shiniest coin in the purse, but it assumed she would know how to do something so basic. It realized now that was perhaps expecting too much from her, given how her only interaction she'd had with magic items thus far had been to break them. Still, it really wasn't that complex a technique,

and if Boxxy could pick it up as a mimic, then so could Arms. It just needed to think of a way to describe the process to her.

“Try to put it in your mouth, roll it around on your tongue, and think about it really hard. Oh, and careful not to bite down on it.”

“… Why does that sound like a blowjob?”

“Just do it.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Kora took the snow-white pearl and did as instructed for several seconds before spitting it back out. She held the drool-covered gem up between her fingers, which was slightly darker in coloration than it used to be.

“This good enough?” she asked expectantly.

“No, but it’s a start. Keep going until I say otherwise.”

While Arms got busy with that, Boxxy grabbed the Midnight Ruby and started crushing it into dust using the mortar and pestle. The specially designed tool had some sort of effect on the gem and allowed the monster to grind up the dark red gemstone without any real difficulty. It was almost as if the precious stone crumbled on its own with the slightest push of the pestle. It still took fifteen minutes to reduce it into the right consistency necessary for the ritual, though this was mostly because the monster was inexperienced with the tools it was using.

Once it was satisfied with its handiwork, it carefully dumped the sparkling powder into the goblet, making extra sure the shiny dust didn’t scatter in the wind.

“Arms, how are things going on your end?”

“Dunno, lemme see.”

Kora spat out the once-white Pure Pearl again, revealing that it was now completely black.

“This is good,” declared Boxxy just before taking it from her.

It briefly thought back on when it first obtained this reagent, wondering exactly why Snack had used her genitals to perform the act. Surely it was

unnecessary, right? Well, it was an unimportant detail, so the monster brushed it off as ‘Snack being Snack.’ Now that it had the re-corrupted pearl in its tentacles, it wiped off the spit, set it down on the wooden branch, and pressed the tip of the mithril nail into it. It then gripped the hammer with a third appendage and firmly tapped the nail’s head several times.

The pitch-black pearl was pierced and cracks spread through it. However, rather than fall apart like glass, it actually held itself together quite well. This was because this peculiar gemstone had a viscous goo-like substance within its tough outer shell. It was more like an egg of some kind, rather than a crystal bead. After confirming everything was going as expected, Boxxy drove the mithril nail clean through the magical gemstone, puncturing it completely and causing the unidentifiable black liquid to drip out. Boxxy hurriedly put the skewered pearl into the wooden goblet, where its juices slowly began mixing with the pulverized Midnight Ruby.

The monster then arranged the five gold coins into a small pentagon and placed the simple cup in the middle of it. Finally, it reached over and grabbed the bottle of Elixir of Avarice it had bought off an alchemist back in Erosa. This orange-colored magic potion supposedly allowed its user to literally sniff out any and all gold within fifteen meters, and its effects lasted for a full day. Boxxy didn’t need this silly thing for itself since its magical perception was already more than capable of doing that, so it poured the contents of the bottle into the wooden goblet without hesitation.

The orange-tinted liquid was quickly dyed blood-red by the powdered Midnight Ruby and started hissing ominously. The punctured pearl floated just beneath the surface of the concoction, despite it being way too heavy to do so under normal circumstances. Boxxy shifted back into its ‘Chester Underwood’ persona for a moment, as the ritual required a humanoid appearance to complete successfully. It wasn’t sure why it chose this shape in particular, though it didn’t really care either way.

Once the ritual site was set up, it deftly grabbed the mithril nail sticking out of the floating pearl and began slowly stirring the mixture and chanting.

“Suspendisse vitae maximus augue, eget porta ante. Nulla eget justo facilisis, sagittis massa in, euismod leo.”

The fraudulent elf's voice carried clearly through the otherwise-quiet night. It was a good thing there was nobody who lived within almost a kilometer of its current position, otherwise they would have surely noticed what was about to happen.

"Curabitur hendrerit libero quis mi finibus, a venenatis neque tincidunt. Pellentesque eleifend efficitur pulvinar."

The pure-white metal nail and pitch-black pearl both turned a deep crimson as they soaked up part of the liquid they floated in.

"Aenean hendrerit dictum maximus."

Boxxy let go of the skewered jewel, which continued to make circular motions as if guided by an invisible hand, and then stood up from its kneeling position.

"Suspendisse potenti Yoitis! Suspendisse potenti Laopra! Suspendisse potenti Tascuna!"

It lifted its head and arms towards the sky while shouting, as if begging each of the moons for a favor in turn.

"Cras eget mauris vulputate, bibendum sem sit amet, elementum felis!"

The five gold coins started vibrating and glowing with a bright yellow light while the skewered pearl levitated a few centimeters into the air. It had absorbed all of the liquid from the goblet and glowed an intense bright red.

"Unc metus ullamcorper libero! Quis bibendum tortor urna nec orci!"

Boxxy felt the hair on its head stand on end along with an odd sense of dread. The monster yelled out the last two words of the chant before it could process the significance of this peculiar sensation.

"Divitias eligo!"

KRAKAKOOOOOM

"Herpaglurgen!"

A bolt of golden lightning struck the wooden goblet despite the total absence of clouds. The unexpected occurrence made blurt out a weird noise while reflexively backing away. The shapeshifter nearly fell of the branch in

its panic and had to shift back into its spider-legged chesty form to cling onto it.

“Boss, you okay down there?!” Kora shouted from somewhere above.

“Nobody told me there would be *lightning* involved!” Boxxy yelled in frustration. “I’ll die for sure if I get hit by that! Seriously, what the crap?! Why do these stupid rituals always try to kill me?!”

The monster let off a rather uncharacteristic string of complaints as it climbed up the side of the branch, back to where it was mere moments prior.

“I think that’s sort of the point, boss,” Kora smirked mockingly.

Her master graciously ignored her unflattering tone and directed its attention towards the place that mystical bolt of lightning had struck. The sturdy Ironbark-covered branch was charred black, a testament to that thunderbolt’s power. The wooden goblet, gold coins and thoroughly expensive mixture had fused together into a solid-gold cup that was shiny beyond belief.

A row of glowing red runes was etched alongside its rim, while intricate golden carvings covered the rest of the vessel. The patterns swirled, swiveled and wrapped around its surface seemingly at random with no beginning or end. A total of twelve red, opal-shaped gems were evenly spaced out around its shining surface. The inside of the goblet was coated by an off-white metal with a slight green hue to it. It held a dark-red liquid oddly reminiscent of blood in its coloration and consistency.

This item’s name, although unknown to Boxxy at the time, was Profanus Gloria.

“…”

The shapeshifter stared intently, feeling a rather ominous aura coming from the object.

“Arms, does that shiny thing look cursed to you?”

Kora took a few steps forward and crouched down to get a better look, her face slowly twisting in confusion.

“No idea. Sorry, boss. This mystical stuff is more the cock-gobbler’s thing.”

“I see.”

Boxxy was more or less convinced there was a curse, as the magic oozing from it was foul and thoroughly un-tasty. It was very similar to how Fizzy’s gauntlet used to be prior to her fusing with it. Although the curse had weakened severely since then, the sensation it gave off at the time was almost identical to the one coming from the goblet. It was the ‘almost’ part that gave Boxxy pause. Looking closer, it appeared that the source of the curse was not the goblet itself, but the strange liquid it held. As the creature got closer, it found itself overcome with a very peculiar urge to drink the stuff in one go. That was clearly a bad idea, and yet part of it still wanted to do it. It *craved* it.

“Uhm, boss?” Kora piped, then swallowed audibly. “Can I get a sip of that?”

It would appear that the fiend was no less influenced by this thing. This was a good opportunity to test its effects, so the monster would allow her to-

“No! It’s mine!” it shouted.

The fiend’s face grew twisted with rage when she heard that. It was a good thing the contract was in place, otherwise Boxxy would definitely have been attacked right now. The worst part of this scenario, however, was that those words were not its own.

“This delicious thing is all mine I tell you!”

It was extremely strange. No matter how much it tried to speak its mind, the wrong words kept coming out. Almost as if someone or something else put those sentences into its mouth. It was probably some strange effect of the curse, which demanded it be consumed post-haste. Quite the powerful effect considering both Boxxy and Kora had formidable MNT Attributes. The shapeshifter had no intention of actually giving into those urges, of course. This was obviously a trap no matter how one looked at it. It wanted Kora to drink up first and serve as a test subject, but it had no idea how to tell her. Ah, perhaps the telepathic link might work?

“Ignore what I said earlier and drink up.”

This appeared to have been the right call.

“Oh, yeaaaah!”

The fiend let out a rather rude-sounding cheer as she eagerly picked up the small gilded cup with both hands. It was quite hot to the touch—unsurprising considering this object had been created in a flash of lightning less than a minute ago. She placed the rim of the goblet against her mouth and tilted it so that the blood-like liquid flowed into it.

The strange substance sprang to life the instant it touched her lips, and every last drop of it forced itself down her throat in an instant. She coughed violently at the sudden oral invasion and instinctively grabbed her throat, letting the goblet fall to the ground with a metallic clatter in the process. Her entire consciousness was suddenly enveloped by a searing pain that flared up across her entire body all at once. It overtook her in a flash, snuffing her life out before she got a chance to scream.

[Your familiar has been banished.]

Boxxy stared curiously at the upright body of its familiar. The fact this cursed liquid was hazardous was hardly surprising considering the ‘Unholy’ part of the ritual, but it wondered how any of this could be considered ‘Wealth.’ That was when the demon’s flesh started crumbling away, falling off her body in small bits and disappearing into nothingness before it even hit the ground. Several seconds later, Boxxy witnessed the true effects of this curse.

For when all of Kora’s skin and muscle had fallen off, all that was left of her was a glittering, golden skeleton. Boxxy stared reverently at the macabre sculpture, captivated by its esoteric beauty. But alas, as something born of mana, the transformed skeleton faded away into nothingness. Not even a second later, the only thing left of it was a fleeting memory.

“NOOOOOO!”

The monster let out a cry of frustration. It was really starting to get sick of all these disappearing shinies. First there was that wonderful treasure chest and now this strangely alluring golden skeleton. It understood why it had happened, but that didn’t make the event any less unpleasant. Deciding it

wanted a permanent golden skeleton, the monster turned its attention to the shiny cup Arms dropped earlier. The curse-carrying object thankfully hadn't rolled off the branch, either because it had either landed upright or because it had stood up on its own after it had been dropped. It had also already refilled itself with the same cursed liquid that killed Arms.

Boxxy went up to the goblet and carefully picked it up. It felt an even stronger urge to chug the clearly deadly substance, but managed to resist long enough to safely tuck it away inside its Storage. It then checked its Demonology Skill, noting with some disappointment that it was currently 96% of the way to Level 8. The shapeshifter had clearly overestimated the amount of Skill Proficiency it would gain from the Unholy Wealth ritual. It then thought back on how the ability progressed fastest not by simply performing rituals, but by putting them to practical use. The implication was that utilizing the cursed cup, which was a byproduct of the Demonology Skill, could give it the final push it needed to reach the next Level.

Deciding that this endeavor was worth a try, Boxxy rapidly made its way down the titanic tree to Azurvale's ground level. Once again disguised as a ginger-haired elf, it stalked the streets until it reached a part of the city known as Dirt Town. This was the run-down and disreputable part of the Republic's capital, filled with slums, gambling dens, whorehouses, and positively overflowing with unsavory individuals. Once here, it made its way towards a certain abandoned warehouse tucked under the shadow of one of the dozens of oversized roots dominating the area.

The building was one of the places groups of homeless bums typically liked to squat in. Even if the Republic was much better at taking care of its poor and downtrodden than, for instance, the Empire, it was inevitable that some people would fall through the cracks. Nobody of real consequence would notice if three or four of these unfortunate souls were to disappear. This made them excellent candidates for a midnight snack. Alternatively, they could also be used as unwitting test subjects for magical experiments with cursed items of demonic origin. Which, as luck would have it, was just the sort of thing that Boxxy was looking for.

The monster quietly climbed atop the sloped roof and peeked inside through a hole. Sure enough, it saw a trio of sleeping elves huddled around a small indoor campfire. Boxxy moved in silently and relieved two of them of their worthless lives, then held the third one down under its deceptively heavy mass. The old man struggled and tried to scream, but his protests were expertly muffled by the experienced man-handler.

The pauper ceased his struggling the instant Boxxy showed him the gilded goblet. His one good eye shone with a dangerous, almost lustful light as he beheld its glory. As expected, those with a low or non-existent MNT Attribute were supremely more susceptible to this thing's influence than Boxxy or Kora. The homeless man was proof enough of that, as he was obviously more interested in drinking from the shiny cup than preserving his own life. The former was the whole reason Boxxy came down here, so not only did it let him drink, it practically force-fed him the contents of that cursed vessel.

The man let out a gurgled scream, as his entire body tensed up, then stopped moving entirely. The molten gold tears that poured out of his unmoving eyes and the shining teeth in his mouth revealed that the Unholy Wealth had taken effect. Looking inside his body with its MLG, Boxxy confirmed that his bones had turned into the same metal it coveted.

[Proficiency level increased. Demonology is now Level 8. WIS +2. MNT +2.]

Finally! Not only did Boxxy obtain a way to get more shiny things, but it had also...

[You have violated the taboo of Goroth and incurred the wrath of the gods!]
[A special action has been performed. FTH -20.]
[Proficiency level increased. Taboo is now Level 1.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Blasphemous Hero.]

...royally screwed itself.

Part Five

“Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap! Crap!”

Boxxy let off a non-stop torrent of swearing as it ran around in a circle like a chicken with its head cut off. After about half a minute of this, it realized this behavior wasn’t particularly constructive and stopped to assess the situation. If there was ever a time to lose its cool and freak out, this was most definitely it. However, this was most definitely not the place for it. It was still inside an abandoned warehouse, next to three corpses, where a night patrol might come to investigate.

It hurriedly tossed the one with the golden skeleton inside its storage, gobbled up the other two and thoroughly cleaned the crime scene. Afterwards, it stealthily left the building and slinked off into the night. It climbed up the side of the adjacent hylt tree until it reached a small, uninhabited branch far from prying eyes. It was as good a spot as any to stop and figure out what had just happened, so it did just that.

First of all, the Taboo Skill. Boxxy had heard much about it and its ill effects, so it knew it would throw a major wrench in its plans to blend in with the local adventuring community. Enlightened beings could sense anyone with the Taboo Skill, and treated them with a general sense of distrust and disgust, if not outright hostility. Such individuals were among the Maleficium guild, usually Warlocks and Necromancers, who had tapped into some forbidden power or another. Such people were tolerated at best, but generally shunned and ostracized by the community. It was not a position Boxxy wanted to be in, but it was the reality its public persona faced.

For the moment, since it had acquired the Taboo Skill anyway, it decided it might as well personally check out its effects.

[Taboo]
The mark of those who have committed grave sins or have willingly gone against the will of the Gods.
Requirements: Negative FTH
Type: Passive

Range: Self
[Effects]
You will be shunned by the pious.
Increases the effectiveness of all forbidden practices and Spells by 10% per Level of this Skill.
Beware the wrath of the gods!

Boxxy had more or less expected something like this. The fact it seemed to have a 'benefit' was a bit surprising though. It now made sense why certain individuals willingly went further into Taboo. The reason Nasty's undead creatures and hexes were so potent might have been because she claimed her Taboo was at Level 7. In hindsight, it was probably a good thing she wasn't around anymore, as a blasphemous existence of that magnitude was bound to be a trouble magnet.

The real question was how would one get rid of this stigma. Boxxy already had an idea of how it could happen. Skills would be disabled and rendered unusable should their owner cease to meet their Requirements. Therefore, if it no longer had 'Negative FTH,' then this Skill should lose its effects. Come to think of it, the Skill itself did not inflict an Attribute change, but was a direct result of one. More specifically, the FTH penalty caused by whatever blasphemous act Boxxy had performed, which changed the spiritual Attribute from 18 to -2. In other words, it only needed to gain two, possibly three points of FTH in order to rid itself of the Taboo.

Boxxy was suddenly immensely thankful it absorbed that Divine Attunement Skill earlier, otherwise this might have been a much more difficult thing to overcome. Snack could cover for its absence for a while, but it was still best if it could get this over with before dawn. It just needed to think of how to do that.

Leveling up Doppelganger or any of the related Skills that boosted All Attributes was an obvious solution, but there was no way it could accomplish that before dawn. Perhaps seeking out a Priest or Paladin trainer would be good? That Job would definitely provide an increase in FTH and could easily be removed once the Doppelganger Job gained a few Levels. Boxxy honestly did not want another Job to worry about though, as it was

already spending every waking moment training one aspect of its Status or another. Therefore, it would maliciously abuse its position as Hero and-

Wait, wasn't there something else it got alongside Taboo?

[Blasphemous Hero]
One who has betrayed the trust of their divine patron.
Requirements: Hero, Taboo
[Effects]
Hero Skills are disabled and cannot be used.

"RRAAAAAAGH!"

Boxxy let out a roar of frustration. This was bad. Really, really bad. So bad it almost made the shapeshifter want to vomit up those homeless people. The main lynchpin of its infiltration operation, the sole thing that allowed it to integrate fully into civilized society, was gone. People trusted Appraisals to an almost outlandish degree. Why wouldn't they? It was a reliable magic that revealed one's true identity and abilities, so Boxxy's ability to subvert that had been like a free pass to do whatever it pleased. Within reason of course. As expected of a Skill granted by the gods, having Essence Concealment truly felt like cheating.

That said, the ability wasn't foolproof. Faehorn seemed to catch on that Keira was more than she seemed, seeing as how he pulled that laughable 'test' of his. If his mock ambush truly came out of nowhere, then Boxxy might have reacted as expected. However, the ex-mimic's magical perception had easily spotted the old elf's approach and intent, so it had been ready. After all, it wasn't like it would die, even if Keira's head was separated from the rest of her. A doppelganger's brain was inside their spinal column, so bisection was actually deadlier to Boxxy than decapitation.

The shapeshifter realized it had gone off on a mental tangent, likely a subconscious effort to escape the reality in which it was royally screwed. Without being able to bypass Appraisal, it would be incredibly difficult to maintain its fake life as an aspiring adventurer. Worst case scenario, it would have to abandon civilization altogether, which would eliminate its main source of Doppelganger XP. This was where it started to envy that

golem, as she had somehow gotten the locals to accept her and lived among them even with her monstrous features.

Wait, that's it! it exclaimed internally.

[Boxxy: Ambrosia, is Fizzy back at the dungeon yet?]
[Ambrosia: Indeed, milord. She hath just arrived.]
[Boxxy: Great! Show her to the emergency exit I installed yesterday.]
[Ambrosia: Right away, milord.]

Surely the Paladin would have some sort of solution. The Taboo Skill would put a momentary strain on their relationship, but she had already pledged herself to Boxxy's service, so it would probably be fine.

Come to think of it, wasn't that dryad some kind of a quasi-divine being? Wouldn't she be the one most disgusted with the Taboo Skill? It seemed logical, but then how come she was acting as if nothing had happened? Was it the core's influence at work? Or, did she simply not realize because the two hadn't met box-to-face yet? Boxxy decided it would be wise to ask her, though in a slightly roundabout way.

[Boxxy: Ambrosia, what do you think of me?]
[Ambrosia: … What hath come over thee, milord?]
[Boxxy: What do you mean?]
[Ambrosia: 'Tis the first time thou hath enquired after mine opinion.]
[Boxxy: There's a first time for everything, right? So please, answer me as truthfully as you can.]
[Ambrosia: If milord insists, then I shall oblige.]

There was a brief pause, as the dryad presumably gathered her thoughts.

[Ambrosia: This one believes milord Morningwood is an outstanding individual with potential the likes of which I hath never seen.]
[Ambrosia: Thy insight and adaptability concerning the world at large are truly worthy of praise.]
[Ambrosia: Milord also takes great care so as not to disrespect or harm mine body in any way, for which this one is truly grateful.]
[Ambrosia: Thy generosity and kindness hath touched this old soul deeply, and I find myself wishing to spend more time in thy company.]

[Ambrosia: ‘Tis also a rare opportunity for me to care for a youngling, which I find to be most fulfilling.]

That was… not quite what Boxxy expected. Or rather, wasn’t that way too high an opinion considering they only met a few days ago? Not to mention that the shapeshifter was pretty sure it hadn’t done anything nearly as great or benevolent as the things the dryad was describing. Then again, this attitude was likely due to the dungeon core’s influence twisting her perception of events. This was still good news, however, as the dryad seemed oblivious to Boxxy’s Taboo, at least for the moment. The doppelganger really didn’t want to test the limits of the dungeon core’s ability to keep an ancient being like Ambrosia in check. Hence why it wanted to keep its heretical inclinations a secret from her as much as possible.

To that end, the monster stealthily made its way over to the tree housing both its new lair and Keira’s home. It climbed up to the hidden dungeon entrance, where it waited patiently for Fizzy’s arrival. She couldn’t abuse Nexus Access, which meant she had to climb up via the stairs. A minute or so passed before the disguised door swung open from the inside, and the mithril golem shone brilliantly under the triple moonlight poking through the tree’s vast canopy.

“Hey, Boxxy!” she said in her usual, cheerful tone. “What did- Ugh! Oh my God!”

Well, that didn’t last long. Her face twisted into a scowl, as if she was staring at a disgusting cockroach she wanted to squish at all costs. It was the same look she kept giving Nasty back when the lich was still around, though slightly more subdued.

“I… accidentally committed a Taboo,” Boxxy informed her.

“Ugh. Yeah, I can feel that,” she cringed. “What in Ricardo’s holy doughnut did you do, Boxxy?!”

The shapeshifter explained the evening’s events, starting with the ritual and ending with it obtaining the Taboo Skill. Fizzy did her best to listen, but it was obvious, she was having a hard time even looking at Boxxy. The way

she made the juvenile doppelganger feel could best be summed up as, ‘not tasty.’

“Yeah, I think I understand what happened,” she said, averting her gaze. “You transmuted something into gold, a valuable metal. Goroth hates that sort of thing. He’s the God of Artists and Artisans, someone who values perseverance and hard work above all else. Having people create expensive minerals for quick and easy profit really grinds his gears.”

She then threw Boxxy a brief, disgusted look before turning away again.

“Also, it’s impossible to ‘accidentally’ commit a Taboo. You knew full well that hobo’s bones would turn to gold when you did the deed, and you intentionally made him drink the cursed stuff.”

“I didn’t know Goroth would hate it, though,” it argued.

“Not knowing a law doesn’t mean you’re exempt from it!” she shot back.

“Well, what about Arms? That guy was clearly okay with me shining her up, so what’s up with that?”

“She’s a demon though. I mean, it’s not like her skeleton stuck around after you made her drink, right?”

“Okay, yeah, I see your point,” it conceded. “Look, I need your help getting rid of it this Taboo thing right away. It should be possible, right?”

“Depends. How much in the negative are you? Your Faith Attribute, I mean”

“Minus two.”

“Okay, that’s good. So long as it doesn’t go beyond negative ten then it’s a relatively easy fix. Just to make it clear, you *do* regret doing what you did, right?”

“Kind of. Mostly because of the Taboo Skill though…”

“Well, that’s better than nothing. So, kneel down, bow your head, and stand still so I can take care of it.”

“Okay.”

The elf-shaped monster assumed the position without protest, allowing the golem to easily place her hands on its shoulders. She hated having to, though. The way her fingers twitched despite her mechanical constitution made *that* abundantly clear, as did the near bone-crushing grip her digits eventually settled into. She then closed her eyes and spoke in a soft voice. Or at least as soft a voice as a mechanical throat and metal mouth could produce.

"Oh, merciful Gods! Behold this poor child who ignored Your will! It has ventured into sin out of ignorance and curiosity, and has unwittingly violated Your most sacred decrees. It has expressed the desire to repent in both mind and body, and solemnly swears to uphold Your values forever more! Your servant begs you, forgive this lost soul for its heretical actions!"

A soft, white radiance flowed out from the gnome's body, ran across her arms and flowed into Boxxy's faux-wood frame.

"Absolution!"

[A pious servant of the Gods has absolved you of your grievous sins.]
[A special action has been performed. FTH +5.]
[Proficiency level decreased. Taboo is no longer available.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Seeker of Redemption.]
[The Blasphemous Hero Perk has been removed since you no longer meet the required conditions.]

The golem let out a small sigh and opened her eyes. Her face instantly slackened to her regular smiling expression.

"All done," she declared.

Boxxy quickly checked its Status, just in case. It was relieved to find that all of the offensive entries were gone, and its FTH Attribute was at a healthy plus three.

"Wow, that *was* easy!" it exclaimed in surprise.

That brief ceremony was much more convenient than temporarily picking up the Paladin Job from Fizzy or scrambling to get Level Ups. As for Seeker of Redemption, the Perk had absolutely no effects whatsoever, and

merely served as a ‘badge of honor’ for those who turned their backs on Taboo. Honestly speaking, Boxxy preferred it doing nothing. It was rapidly learning that Perks were sometimes more trouble than they were worth.

“Thanks, Fizzy,” it said, clearly in a good mood. “I’ll be counting on you the next time, too.”

“Oh no! No, no, no, no, no!” Fizzy waved her hands around angrily. “Don’t even *think* about using that Unholy Wealth thing again. Absolution is not a ceremony that can be used lightly. It drains away my own FTH Attribute to cast it, you know! Not to mention it will only work two or three times per person, and that’s only if they’re lucky. That might as well have been your only pardon.”

Forgiveness, it would seem, was a very finite resource.

“I see. I guess it can’t be helped then.”

The monster regretfully conceded that the cursed goblet in its Storage would have to be put away for the foreseeable future.

“What about the guy I already transmuted?” it asked a moment later.

“… I don’t know to be honest. Trying to profit off his golden bones might trigger another Taboo violation.”

“I’m not going to sell them though. I just want to add his skeleton to my collection.”

“Right, hmm… I’ll have to ask the guys at the guild later, so don’t do anything rash before that, okay?”

“Alright. Wait, guild? You joined one?”

“Yeah, the Hammers of Horkensaft. Many people in that artisan’s guild worship Goroth, so there’s a good chance someone there has the answers you’re looking for.”

“And you have no problems blending in with those guys?”

“None at all. They love me over there,” she proudly puffed out her chest. “They’ve never had an Arclight Artificer before, so they’re really interested in my work. They’re also a bunch of dwarves and gnomes so they’re not too

bothered by having a golem around. Well, I guess it's a bit annoying to have those lowly meatbags asking to examine my mithril frame, but for the most part they seem content to just admire my flawless construction from afar."

Boxxy completely understood that attitude. Fizzy's shininess was truly breathtaking at times, so their behavior was only to be expected. Come to think of it, dwarves seemed to enjoy shiny things almost as much as Boxxy did. The shapeshifter realized it might be a good idea to get better acquainted with them, mostly to see if they had anything especially shiny worth stealing. Having a bunch of coins and gemstones was well and good, but it really wanted to get its tentacles on some purely decorate stuff like statuettes or ceremonial armor.

Variety was, after all, the spice of life.

With the Taboo crisis swiftly averted, Boxxy went back into the dungeon and moved to the dungeon core platform with Fizzy in tow. Ambrosia had been patiently waiting for Boxxy's return, while still hanging onto Minic. Now that she had the chance, she presented the golem with the Bracelet of Allegiance she had prepared in advance, which was graciously accepted. The dryad's expression became slightly more relaxed the instant Fizzy put the simple-looking bracelet on her right wrist. As expected, Ambrosia did feel a bit uneasy around invaders in her dungeon, even if they were 'milord's servants.' Boxxy, on the other hand, made sure to turn on the Surveillance Net's intruder alerts, just in case.

Then came the moment that the shapeshifter had been looking forward to for literally the entire latter half of its life.

1-800-7355-9687-7685

Beep ... Beep

Click

"You have reached Demons 'R' Us."

Boxxy got the usual textbook greeting, although that smooth, silky, almost sensual voice was not one it had heard before.

"My name is Janet and I will be your liaison today."

Yeah okay, that definitely wasn't who it expected.

"Hello?" Janet asked after a few seconds of silence.

"Where's Carl?"

"I'm sorry sir, but- Oh. OH!? Oh my god! Is this Boxxy?!"

"It is."

"*The* Boxxy T. Morningwood?!"

"Yes?"

"Oh, wow! This! Is! So! Cool! I am a huge fan of your work!"

"Uh… okay?"

"I mean it! I loved every single thing I've seen you do! I think my personal favorite was the way you smashed that Jade King fellow or whatever his face was! Like, he didn't even get a chance to show off before you annihilated him! It was amazing! Oh damn, the girls are never going to believe I got to speak with *the* Hero of Chaos!"

"…. So, where's Carl?" asked Boxxy, making sure to make the irritation clear in its tone.

"Oh, who cares about Carl," she scoffed. "Let's talk about *you*!"

"I'm hanging up now."

"No! Mister Morningwood, sir! Please wait!"

Click

Okay. That was weird. This entire day was just one surprise after the other. Admittedly a little excitement every now and then wasn't a bad thing, but this was too much. Whoever that woman was, it didn't seem like-

Ring-ring

Demons 'R' Us called Boxxy back a few seconds later, prompting it to immediately answer.

Click

"Hello?"

“Hey, buddy.”

“Carl! Finally! You would not believe how unprofessional that Janet person was.”

The shapeshifter had a few opinions regarding the demonic agency, but chief among them was that it expected employees to conduct themselves in an appropriate manner.

“Yeah, tell me about it. Look, I’m sorry you had to hear that. It’s just that we’re a bit swamped right now, what with the Lunar Convergence going on. The system’s overloaded, so some folks get redirected to the wrong devils, some of whom are kinda new. Jarogib- I mean, Janet’s one of those rookies and her conduct was completely unacceptable. I give you my personal guarantee you won’t be connected to anyone other than me ever again.”

“Good enough for me.”

“So, what can I help you with today, Boxxy?”

Well, the original purpose was to obtain its third demonic contract as a result of reaching Level 8 of its Demonology Skill. However, a more pressing question was on Boxxy’s mind right now.

“Before that I would like to clarify something.”

“I’ll do my best to answer any and all concerns you may have, so long as they fall within the scope of your contract.”

“How come Janet knew everything I was doing?”

It sounded like she’d been made privy to Boxxy’s entire life. It wasn’t just her, either. Carl had hinted at knowing a lot more about the shapeshifter’s exploits during previous conversations. Overlord Liusolra’s note was also strangely casual and familiar, almost as if she had been familiar with the creature prior to being summoned.

“That’s probably your familiars’ fault. They brag incessantly, you know.”

“Carl. You’re bullshitting me right now. Either tell me what’s going on, or I’m going to personally complain to Tracy. You wouldn’t want that now, would you?”

Admittedly Boxxy had no idea how to contact the Goddess of Discord, but Carl hopefully didn't know that.

"Yeah… Okay," the otherworldly entity conceded with a sigh. "You're bound to find out eventually, so I might as well tell you. You know how the big boss upstairs keeps a very close eye on everything you're doing, purely for entertainment?"

"I'm aware, yes. What of it?"

"So… He's been… sort of… sharing your adventures with the rest of us."

"What? Why?"

"Blessed if I know. He probably thought it would be fun."

"Can he even do that?"

"Yes. Remember those broadcasts I mentioned a while back?"

"Right. That. So, he's been showing what I do to everyone at Demons 'R' Us?"

"… That's one way of putting it," Carl said evasively.

"It's not just those who work at Demons 'R' Us, is it?"

"No."

Boxxy took a deep breath.

"How many?"

"Well, it's hard to get an accurate number on account of-"

"How many demons, Carl?!"

"… All of them."

"*All* of them?! You're saying every single demon out there knows what I've been up to?!"

"Pretty much."

"Since when?!"

"Ever since you became a Hero. Although, there are reruns while you sleep so… we've seen pretty much everything since the Monotal thing."

“Well… Do you guys *have* to watch me?”

“No, not really. We can tune out the Progenitor’s broadcasts of the Boxxy Show if we wish. It’s just that we have literally nothing better to do over here.”

“… Can they see me right now?”

“Oh, yeah. You’re in the corner of my mind as we speak, just sort of sitting there in the tree, doing nothing in particular.”

“What about this conversation?”

“Demons ‘R’ Us considers contracts a private matter, so you can be assured this call isn’t part of the broadcast. Same goes for most forms of telepathic communication, but audio and visual stuff comes through loud and clear.”

“You could’ve told me about this sooner, you know.”

“What, and ruin the fun?”

Boxxy took a few moments to process the demon’s words. It analyzed their implications and decided on a course of action.

“At least I’m popular, right?”

Janet’s reaction would suggest as much, but getting some actual confirmation seemed like a good idea.

“Oh, immensely so. A recent survey said all but 4% of demons tuned into the Boxxy Show on a daily basis,” Carl explained. “We’ve had a bunch of other similar broadcasts with Abraham’s previous Heroes, but yours is by far the biggest hit we’ve seen.”

“Then it’s okay if I take a few minutes to address my audience, right?”

“Uhh, I guess? It’s your show, you can do whatever you damn well please. And you usually do. That’s what makes this whole thing so interesting in the first place.”

“Good. That’s good. Can you hold for a few minutes?”

“Sure.”

Boxxy told Ambrosia and Fizzy to go about their business, then used Nexus Access to return to the highest point in the dungeon. It climbed back up to the site where the Unholy Wealth ritual took place and reverted into its base doppelganger form. It stared intently at a random point in the horizon for a few seconds, and then its featureless face split open like a fleshy book filled with teeth.

“Hello, demons and demonettes,” it stated in a clear, commanding voice. “In case some of you have not realized, there is currently an opening for the position of my third contracted familiar. I will be finalizing said contract in three hours’ time. If any of you think you have what it takes to fulfill that role, then please contact Carl from Demons ‘R’ Us with your application. I will only accept the most motivated of applicants, so make sure you demand to be picked while entering this little contest.”

It tilted its head slightly and showed a toothy, sideways smile.

“I trust the best of you will not back down in the face of your clearly inferior competitors.”

Of course, there was nobody around in the dead of night to actually answer Boxxy’s provocative words, except for a certain devil that was still on the other end of the trans-dimensional call.

“What was that about?!”

“What?” Boxxy asked innocently.

“You know how much of a massive pain in the ass this will be to deal with!?” Carl complained. “I’ve already got like forty demons lined up outside my office screaming over each other! Why not just make a contract the usual way?!”

“Oh, dear. That simply won’t do,” it responded sarcastically. “I suppose doing things the usual way might be for the best, after all.”

“Then tell that to the rest of them before this gets out of hand!”

“What?” the shapeshifter smirked internally. “*And ruin the fun?*”

Chapter Three
Claws

Part One

“Gotta admit, Boxxy, you got balls,” Carl grumbled over the line. “Very few Warlocks would even think of pulling a prank like that.”

It was now the promised three hours after Boxxy’s ‘familiar competition.’ While the shapeshifter spent that time alternating between Artificer practice with Fizzy and having fun with its collection of shinies, Carl had to deal with hundreds, possibly thousands of calls from selfish demons. That said, it was likely none of them were actually all that serious, and they just played along with the doppelganger’s scheme for shits and giggles.

“Just getting a bit of payback for that ‘Boxxy Show’ thing,” it stated plainly.

“What, on me?”

“Who else?”

The monster really did not take kindly to having an untold number of demons watching its every move. While the main perpetrator was the God of Impossibilities, the simple creature lacked a way to get back at him. Therefore, it lashed out at the most convenient target. However, it had failed to consider that this little stunt might piss off a bunch of demons that might have revealed its secret identity to the world purely out of spite.

Thankfully, the Goddess of Chance took her non-interference policy seriously, and gave each and every resident of the Beyond a gag order. They were not to disclose the existence or contents of the ‘Boxxy Show’ to mortals if they valued their ongoing existence. This was also why neither Xera nor Kora could tell their master about it, as neither of them were sure whether that limitation also applied to the star of the show. As much as they liked working under the shapeshifter, there was someone else higher up the pecking order they couldn’t afford to ignore.

At least they could speak freely about it now that a certain someone had already spilled the beans.

“Okay, I may have deserved that a little bit,” Carl admitted. “Right then, shall we get on with the familiar selection process?”

“You’re not going to sabotage my contract or something, right?”

“Of course not. It takes a lot more than a silly thing like that to make an old devil like me compromise an agreement.”

Devils were pretty much the only demons who used violence as a last resort. They weren’t partial to punching mortals in the face, instead preferring to trick them into soul-binding contracts with bittersweet promises of power, then reveling in the suffering that followed. Very few of them ever made an appearance in the physical realm, preferring to do their dirty business from the Beyond.

Or at least that was how they had been in ages past when Demons ‘R’ Us hadn’t been established yet. These days, they mostly served as operators and agents and were, in general, a lot less malicious. One thing that had remained the same was the strict and unapologetic way they abided by all clauses of any contracts they had made. They adhered to those things as if their very existence hinged on it. That was probably why their kind was officially in charge of managing Warlock-familiar relations.

Boxxy’s recently upgraded Demonology Skill revealed this information, which allowed the monster to make the following deduction.

“In other words, you won’t screw me on the contract, but you’ll still get me back somehow.”

“Better believe it, buster.”

The two shared a small chuckle as Boxxy set aside the explosive device it had been working on, giving Carl its undivided attention.

“Ready when you are, Carl.”

“Alright. Give me a minute to pull up the relevant forms here. Oh, forward me your Status like before.”

Boxxy did as instructed and waited while listening to the all-too-familiar clacking noises from across the line. Now that the shapeshifter thought about it, what were those about? Well, it would just ask another time. It really didn’t want to put off this contract any more than it had to, and the sun was about to come up. Not that it worried about Rowana waking up, though. Snack was still next to elf and diligently kept her magically

sedated. It was hardly the first time they had done this, although Boxxy had to make sure it gave her specific orders not to mess with the elf while she slept.

Simply keeping Rowana asleep took very little effort on Xera's behalf, which left the demoness bored with nothing to do. This was something her Master failed to take into account the first time it had to sneak out of that house at night. When it returned a few hours later, it found the succubus toying with the blissfully unaware elf to keep herself entertained. Rowana's face had penises scribbled all over it, her nose and mouth were caked with questionable fluids and the succubus was moments away from shaving off the elf's pubic hair. Boxxy somehow managed to clean up all traces of her antics without Rowana realizing she'd been molested. The shapeshifter also had to thoroughly punish Xera for her misbehavior afterwards.

That, incidentally, had been exactly what the succubus wanted in the first place.

"Okay, everything appears to be in order," Carl eventually declared. "Well then, what species are you looking to form a covenant with this time?"

This was actually something Boxxy had been thinking on for a long while. While it was entirely possible to have another succubus or fiend around, it wouldn't be very practical. Although flexible to a degree, a demonic familiar was essentially a tool. There was a right and wrong way to use it, and having more of the same tool didn't mean the work would get done any faster or easier. Therefore, of the remaining types of demon available, Boxxy chose the one it felt would fit in best with its posse's composition.

"Stalker."

The shapeshifter's current entourage sorely lacked when it came to stealth. Boxxy always found itself having to leave Fizzy, Snack and Arms behind whenever it wanted to sneak around. This left it without immediate backup should things go awry. Granted, Snack could sometimes accompany it with her Invisibility, but she lacked a means of silently eliminating a target. The other two were right out. Therefore, a stalker's natural aptitude for skulking around made it a perfect candidate. Not to mention their vaunted anti-magic

abilities would surely help protect the shapeshifting monster from its dreaded Bane—lightning-based magic.

"… Alright, if you say so," came Carl's strangely delayed response.

"What, you got a problem with it?"

"No, no, it's your decision. Male or female?"

"Female."

According to the high-Level Demonology Skill, female stalkers were generally slimmer and lither than males, making them better at hiding. Having less muscle mass than the males also meant their melee attacks would struggle to take down armored targets, but that wasn't something Boxxy was particularly concerned with.

"Height preference?"

"Mid-range."

Too tall and it would mean the demon would be too big a target. Too small and its attack range would suffer.

"And I'm assuming one with a large chest, right?"

Boxxy very nearly answered 'Yes' on reflex, but stopped itself due to a sudden epiphany. The chest-shaped monster turned its thoughts towards Kora and Xera, and the only thing their physical appearances had in common. Namely, the quartet of watermelon-sized lumps of fat upon the front side of their torsos.

"Uh, Carl? This question about chest size, does it perhaps refer to breasts?"

"Of course it does! What else would- Oh."

There was a moment of awkward silence as both parties realized their mutual misunderstanding.

"So then," said Carl, trying to get the contract process back on track, "do you want a familiar with large or small tits?"

"You said it doesn't impact their performance, right?"

"That's right."

“Then whatever is fine.”

“Large it is.”

Takak-taktak tak tak

“Hey!” Boxxy protested over the mind-link.

“What? You said you didn’t care.”

“I meant I have no preference. Not the same thing.”

“Tsk,” Carl clicked his tongue. “Fine. Spoilsport. Moving on, would you say you’re more of an evening person, or a morning person?”

“I don’t think I qualify as a ‘person,’ Carl.”

“Good point, ‘neither’ it is. Which do you think is more dangerous—one giant-sized goblin, or a hundred goblin-sized giants?”

“The latter.”

“What’s your second-least favorite color?”

There were several more such questions that seemed entirely unrelated to the matter at hand. Boxxy had no idea why it was forced to answer these, but it had already given up on questioning or arguing the process. After the first two times, it had just come to accept this nonsensical survey as part of the process. It didn’t even need to answer truthfully either, so it played along with Carl’s script until he finally came around to the last question.

“Only if they have toes,” Boxxy stated confidently.

“Heh, that’s a new one,” the devil chuckled. “And finally, do you have any additional requests or requirements regarding your contract?”

It was something Boxxy had been woefully unprepared to answer previously. It hadn’t realized it at the time, but this question was arguably as important as the first. The monstrous Warlock simply hadn’t known any better when it recruited Snack and Arms, so it had to rely on Carl’s interpretation of its wishes. While things had somehow worked out relatively well, it hadn’t been until Boxxy got its Demonology to Level 6 that it fully understood the importance of this deceptively simple question.

When contracting a new familiar, the Warlock's first answer dictated their new servant's species, but their last answer determined the subspecies that would be assigned to them. While one could argue that all succubi, for instance, were basically the same, each *type* of succubus was notably different from the rest. For instance, only cerulean succubi like Xera could do so by manipulating their dreams and fantasies. Viridian ones, on the other hand, could produce various magical sedatives and poisons, which they used to drug their prey. Then there was the violet variant of succubi—sadistic and calculating creatures with an unnatural gift for spatial manipulation magic.

In short, considering the various alternatives, Boxxy had been quite fortunate to have ended up with Snack. It was certain that, with everything it had been through, it would not have survived this long if it had wound up with one of the aforementioned alternatives. The same couldn't be said about Arms though, as all fiends adhered to the stereotype of 'big angry thing that hits things until they die' with only minor variations.

In any event, drawing upon both its expanded knowledge and past experiences allowed Boxxy to determine exactly the type of stalker it wanted for its third familiar.

"First and foremost, I want a hornet variant."

This particular subspecies had access to a paralytic venom that could either hinder, subdue, or outright kill a target, depending on the dosage and circumstances.

"They also need to be a competent Rogue adept at assassinating Casters," it continued. "Especially Shamans, Wizards, and Cryomancers."

The best way to deal with a wielder of the arcane arts was to eliminate them before they even knew someone was there, and those three occupations were especially troublesome. According to Boxxy's research, Shamans and Wizards were the primary sources of lightning magic. Though not all of them specialized in such Spells, they were still some of the biggest threats to the shapeshifter's life. The doppelganger was also quietly thankful that there seemed to be no such thing as an Electromancer Job, as that would have been seriously bad news.

As for Cryomancers, those were on the list because their magic could freeze a shapeshifter's malleable flesh in place, potentially depriving Boxxy of its most versatile ability.

"Well, aren't you a discerning customer?!" Carl asked in genuine surprise. "It feels like it was only three months ago you asked me if the Beyond is tasty!"

"It *was* three months ago."

Also Boxxy never got an answer as to whether or not the Beyond was, in fact, tasty, but it decided not to push the issue.

"Oh, right. Anyway, lemme just finish writing all that down…"

Takak taktak taktak, takakaktatatatatak

"Okay, all set. Now, we just need to wait for it, aaaand… Yep! There it is—a near-instant one-hundred-percent match, to absolutely nobody's surprise."

Well, except for Boxxy's. It had expected that finding a demon to match its specific demands would take longer, but this was not the case. Perhaps its popularity meant a lot of demons were eager to fill in the slot and enjoy the same privileges that Snack and Arms had.

"There you go, your third familiar is all set up and ready for action," Carl reported. "Will that be all for today?"

"Yes."

"Would you like to fill out a survey to help improve our customer service?"

"… Yes, actually."

"Well, that's too bad, because we don't have something like that. Thank you for calling Demons 'R' Us, we'll be in touch."

Click

Boxxy wasn't quite sure what it expected from that 'survey,' but that definitely wasn't it. Oh, well. The important thing was that it finally obtained a third demonic servant. Thinking it was perhaps a noteworthy occasion, it told Fizzy and Ambrosia to gather around to witness the new girl's first summoning. It even summoned Arms back first, just so she could

join in. The fiend seemed rather excited to meet her new colleague, mostly because she was eager for a fresh set of holes to violate. As for the old set—which was to say, Xera—she was on Rowana-sitting duty and wouldn't show up until later.

With the audience gathered, Boxxy activated its Summon Familiar Skill while focusing on the third being linked to its soul. The concentric circles of light spun around for the usual seconds, followed by a small flash.

"Skrktktktktkt!"

A low chitter could just barely be heard as *something* burst out of the lingering magical glow and skittered away from the spider-chested doppelganger at breathtaking speed. Even Boxxy had difficulty tracking the thing as it slinked off into the shadows, but it wasn't as if it particularly needed to.

"Stop running away and come to me."

The simple command was all the weird person-sized spider-thing needed to cease its retreat. It then turned around and, strangely enough, stood up as it slowly approached the shapeshifter.

The newest addition to Boxxy's entourage was revealed to be a mostly humanoid demon, about a hundred-and-sixty centimeters in height. It, or rather, *she,* was clearly female, with thick thighs, wide hips, a thin waist, and a relatively modest pair of breasts, at least when compared to the succubus's impractically huge knockers. She had black hair styled into a slightly elaborate ponytail with heavy bangs on the right side, all held together by hairclips made of chitin. Her face was also clearly feminine in its contours, except for the large pair of serrated mandibles growing out of the sides and past her chin. There was also the matter of four tiny fang-things poking out of the corners of her lips, and the yellow compound eyes that looked like a bug's. Those sharp choppers were definitely the main attention-getters in the facial region. though. The jagged tips clacked together nervously, producing a barely audible chitter the entire time.

The rest of her body had a number of arachnid and clearly monstrous features. Her skin, for instance, seemed to be comprised of two layers of segmented carapace. One lower one was soft, reddish-purple, slightly moist,

and served as the demon's 'skin.' It was adorned by a number of yellow crescent-shaped marks—two on each cheek, bicep, and thigh. The upper layer of carapace was a much darker hue of red than the lower one and was also visibly more solid, sort of like armor. 'Sort of' being the operative phrase here, as it barely covered any of her torso and made it seem like she wore a bikini, even though it was part of her body. This tougher set of carapace also covered her shoulders and the outer parts of her limbs, where it was much thicker.

Speaking of limbs, this arachnid demon had some positively deadly ones. Her arms and legs ended in a set of large claws that looked like flexible knives, with two 'toes' on each foot and three 'fingers' on each hand. Those sharp digits likely made it impossible for her to grip anything even remotely soft without dicing it up. The deadliest appendages she had were the six long limbs poking out from either side of her chest. These looked faintly like arachnid legs that were attached to the girl's upper back, except their tips were replaced with long and thin scythe-like claws. Each of these bladed appendages had a slightly longer reach than her dagger-tipped arms, and was just as flexible to boot.

The freshly summoned demoness fidgeted nervously for several seconds as Boxxy took in her appearance.

"She looks great," it commented with approval. "Every part of her looks like it was designed to maim people."

These words of praise made the spider-girl fidget even more as she turned her face to the side, wanting to avoid meeting anyone's gaze.

"She's really fast, too," Fizzy chimed in. "I couldn't even keep my eyes on her when she made a run for it earlier."

"Milord's newest servant is most impressive," Ambrosia added with a surprisingly cheerful voice. "Spiders art natural predators of vermin, so I am certain she will be of great help to me!"

"Ah, crap, she's a stalker," Kora grumbled. "That means she probably doesn't have any useful holes down there."

She remembered that fiends and succubi were more or less the only demons whose physical forms had somewhat functioning genitalia, mostly because they were the only ones that actively used them. It was part of who they were. A stalker, however, was motivated by food and solitude—not the sort of demon that would partake in sexual domination or lethal intercourse. This meant that Kora had to give up on her selfish ploy to 'break in the new girl.' One could argue that the arachnid demon still had a mouth that could be 'used,' but not even the pit fiend would hesitate to put her junk anywhere near those mandibles.

"Uhm… Uhm!"

The spider-girl suddenly let out a quiet voice that sounded surprisingly youthful, though she failed to actually say anything with it.

"I'm… Uh… My name is… Tktktk… that is… Err… Tktktkt…"

Her mandibles clicked and chittered audibly as she tried and failed to articulate her thoughts. It seemed to be some kind of nervous tick that she couldn't control, as she grew more flustered the louder it got. This, in turn, only made the chittering more intense. It took her a few seconds of increasingly awkward stammering before she realized she was getting nowhere. She closed her eyes, took a few deep breaths, and finally managed to introduce herself to her new master.

"My name is Dreaheath Uniolphial Maramakartor!" she rapidly squeaked out. "I look forward to servicing- I mean, serving you!"

Just as Boxxy expected, it was another pointlessly long name that was difficult to pronounce. It was both bothersome to say, and a potential hindrance when things got heated in battle. Much as it had done with Xera and Kora, it decided to give its third familiar a thoroughly uninspired nickname of her own.

"Your name is now Claws," it firmly declared.

"Un-understood!" she shouted. "I shall work myself to the bone for you, tktktktkt, Master Morningwood!"

"Good. I look forward to seeing you in action. For now, let's set some ground rules."

It quickly gave the newcomer the same set of standing orders it gave the other familiars.

First and foremost, she was to protect its life, and inform it the instant she detected anything or anyone that was a legitimate threat. Secondly, she was to never undertake any action that would compromise its cover as either Keira or the Sandman, unless she had been expressly ordered to. This stipulation included the indiscriminate murder of civilians, as that sort of thing tended to attract the wrong kind of attention. Thirdly, she was to listen to and obey Boxxy's non-demonic followers, which was to say Ambrosia and Fizzy, to the best of her ability, so long as what they wanted didn't violate either of the previous two points.

These were the main ones, though each major rule also had a bunch of supplementary stipulations that covered all of the details and what-ifs the shapeshifter could think of. It didn't trust its familiars not to mess things up, even if they didn't mean to, so it resorted to carrying out what was essentially a sermon every time it had to summon one of them. Neither Snack nor Arms tried to conceal their displeasure at hearing the same old boring instructions all the time, but Claws's attitude was different. The nervous spider-girl seemed surprisingly earnest, replying to each statement with nothing more than a hesitant nod of affirmation.

"Alright, I think that's everything," Boxxy stated as it wrapped things up a few minutes later. "I'd like to give your abilities and skills a proper tryout right away, but it's almost dawn and I have a gullible elf to attend to. We'll put off the field test until tonight, but I feel confident you will not disappoint me, Claws."

"O-o-of course not, tktktktkt!" Drea quickly added.

"Good! Now then, I'll leave you to get better acquainted with the others."

With that settled, Boxxy started focusing on the Transfamiliar Spell.

"Uhm! Master! I have something else to say!"

It was then rudely interrupted by the stalker's loud outburst. The shapeshifter wondered what could be so important that she couldn't just use the mental link between them. Or rather, if what she wanted to say was

something of actual substance, then surely telepathy would have been a preferable method of communication to plain speech. Still, it wasn't in any sort of rush, so it decided to humor her for now.

"What is it, Claws?"

"W-Well the thing is that, uhm… I uh… Lo-tktktkt… Lo-tktktktk… Huff, huff, huff!"

Drea started hyperventilating, but managed to pause and steady her breathing, much like how she had done earlier.

"I LOVE YOU!" she loudly blurted out.

"That's nice."

Her sporadic and highly unusual confession seemed to fall on deaf hinges, as Boxxy replied in a thoroughly casual and uninterested tone without missing a beat.

"I'll be going now."

Drea stood in stunned silence with her arms and sickle-legs wrapped around her as if she was hugging herself. Her mouth opened and closed multiple times, yet no sound left her throat. She was so speechless that even her mandibles failed to produce their nervous chitter. This carried on until Boxxy traded places with Xera in a puff of smoke. The succubus barely caught a glimpse of the stalker running away on all tens, no doubt on her way to hide in the darkest corner of the Dryad's Domain.

The confused seductress looked at the others. Ambrosia smiled with a bit too much enthusiasm. Fizzy hid her face in her hands, as if trying to shield herself from taking any cringe damage. Kora just stood there with an oddly worried look.

"Okay… What did I miss?"

The Boxxy Show couldn't be broadcasted outside the Beyond and the only thing her master had told her was that it had contracted a stalker demon. As a result, Xera had been left almost completely out of the loop.

"This might be bad, bubble-butt," Kora spoke up. "The new girl, the one that just skittered away? She just yelled out that she loved the boss."

“You’re sure of this?” the succubus asked in a stern voice. “She said she *loved* Master? Those words exactly?”

“Oh, yeah. Loud and clear. The boss just brushed her off but… yeah.”

“Ah crap, this might get ugly…”

“What’s the big deal?” Fizzy butted. “Are you getting jealous or something?”

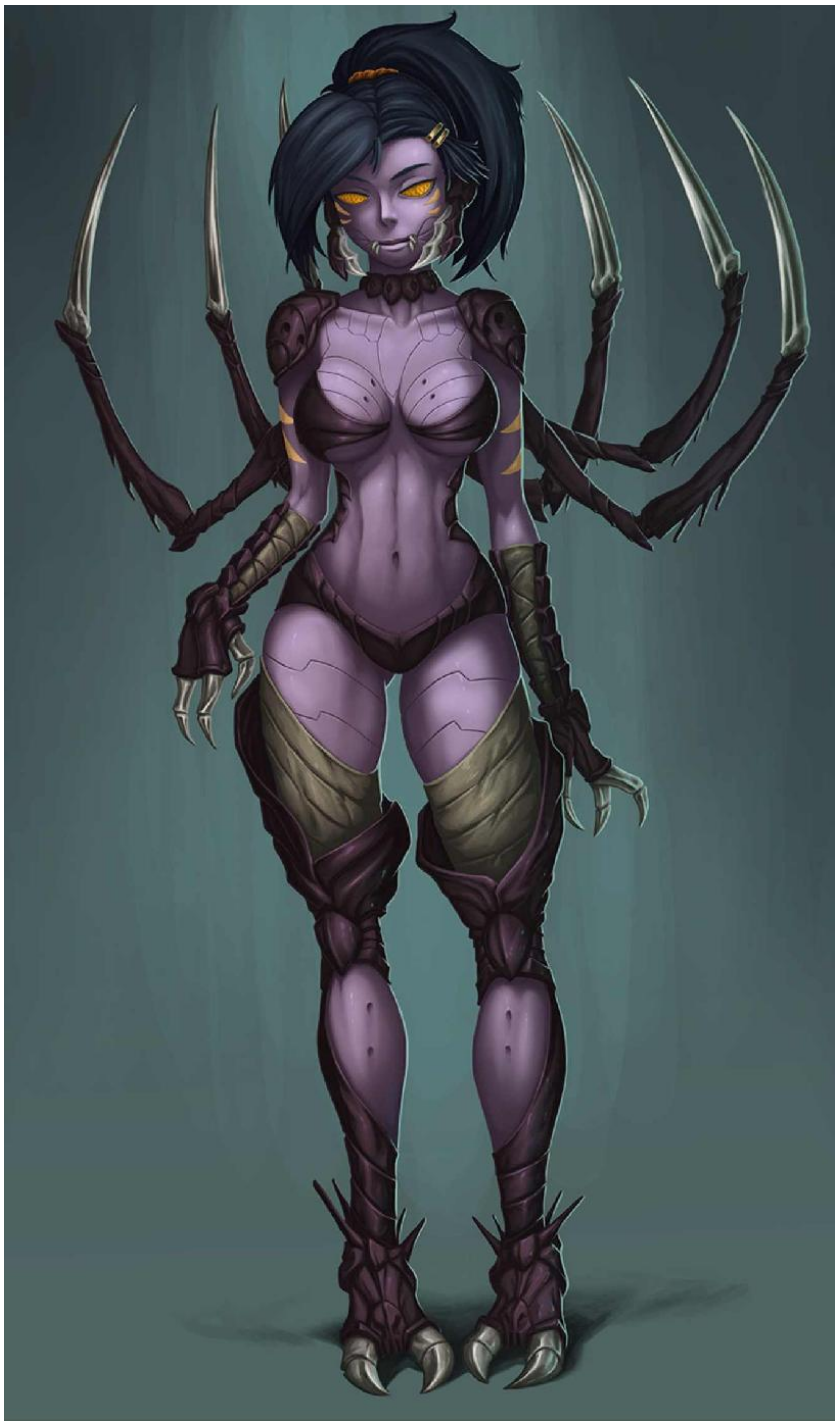
“Of course not, don’t be silly.”

Xera felt quite confident in her position as her Master’s tastiest Snack, and that was as close to a genuine romantic relationship that thing would ever commit to. The thing that concerned her and Kora was something else entirely.

“Then what’s got your panties in a bunch?” the golem insisted.

“Stalkers have a hard time telling the difference between affection and appetite.”

In other words, Drea’s confession most likely meant that she didn’t want to *date* Boxxy, but to *dine* on it.



[General Information]
Dreaheath Uniolphial Maramakartor
Stalker (Hornet), Female, 814 years old
Level 39.79 Stalker

Level 27.14 Rogue
2284/2284 HP (+4.0/sec)
1465/1565 MP (+1.7/sec)

[Attributes]
STR 234, DEX 644, AGI 586, END 410, INT 293, WIS 175, MNT 586

[Stalker Skills]
Stalk – Lvl 10.00 (MAX)
Counterspell – Lvl 8.10
Rending Claws – Lvl 7.52
Blood Gorger – Lvl 5.76
Detect Magic – Lvl 4.08
Magic Resistance – Lvl 2.75
[Rogue Skills]
Assassination – Lvl 9.75
Misdirection – Lvl 7.29
Evasion – Lvl 6.26
Silent Sprint – Lvl 4.62
[Other Skills]
Webspinner – Lvl 6.77
Venomous Sting – Lvl 6.77

Part Two

Keira ‘woke up’ the next day as per usual. She had her morning interactions with Rowana, making sure the elf felt loved and appreciated. She played a bit with Minic, who had very nearly been forgotten about back in the dungeon, and fed it some dried fruits that the couple had bought the day before. The catgirl eventually began to leave the house in order to attend Faehorn’s Ranger course, but Minic seemed strangely determined to follow her outside. The mini-mimic had apparently grown overly attached to what it probably saw as its ‘bigger cousin,’ and would not settle down unless Boxxy was nearby.

“Why don’t you just take him along?” Rowana suggested.

“I don’t think mister Faehorn would appreciate me bringing a pet to class. Especially not with our line of work.”

“Okay, tell you what. Since I have the time, why don’t we both go? If this Faehorn character doesn’t let you look after it during the day, then I’ll bring it home with me.”

“But someone might try to steal it again!”

“Yip!”

The catgirl hugged the gilded box closer to her chest, as if to protect it. That was actually genuine concern on Boxxy’s part, since it already considered Minic to be part of its collection of shinies. The shapeshifter was certain it could handle another theft attempt, as long as it was around. A weakling like Rowana, however, stood no chance. Actually, that was also a good point.

“You might even get hurt!”

“Sweetie, please. I’m not some frail damsel that can’t take care of herself,” she insisted. “Believe it or not, I’ve been living alone for years. The thug from yesterday just caught me by surprise, that’s all.”

Indeed, though the elf’s Alchemist Job wasn’t a combat-oriented profession, it still afforded her certain means of self-defense. Her father had taught her

to always have a small arsenal of capsules and vials hidden on her person whenever she went out. These contained a selection of adhesives, gasses, acids, and elixirs that could fend off an assailant while she either escaped or called for help. Admittedly, it had been a long while since she'd had to resort to these measures, but she felt confident that some random hoodlum wouldn't get the better of her again.

"Really? So you'd be fine with Mr. Faehorn finding out about our relationship?" Keira argued.

"Uh…"

"He's really sharp, Rowie. I'm sure he'll be able to instantly tell that you and I are girlfriends."

It was a bit of a low blow on Boxxy's part, but it wasn't above some using some mild manipulation to get its way.

"Alright, fine," Rowana conceded. "I'll make sure Minic stays put. Hand it over."

The elf took the living jewelry box from Keira and held it tight against her chest. The critter struggled a bit, but settled down when it felt her chest-pillows press against its underside. This let Boxxy to conclude that, as odd as it seemed, the genderless Minic definitely liked breasts. Well, the thing was technically part demon, so it didn't seem unreasonable for it to have certain urges. Unless, of course, the doppelganger misunderstood its tastes, but now wasn't the time to speculate on such trifling details.

Having resolved the matter of pet care, Keira left the house and made her way to the Central Consortium building. This time, she used the regular walkway rather than swinging around on vines, as she had gotten an earful about it from Rowana. Having to pretend to care about her opinion, the shapeshifter resolutely climbed up the large, circular staircase all the way around the outside of the hylt tree. Once it got to the upper branch, it rode one of the floating elevator platforms down to the ground and proceeded along its usual route from there.

It arrived to class fashionably late in accordance with Keira's character, then proceeded to make nice with the rest of the trainees, not forgetting to

pay special attention to the tasty-smelling Lia. The green-haired elf opened up after yesterday, and confessed she had been targeted by bullies during her childhood because of her quarter-human lineage. She claimed this experience helped her partly understand what she imagined Keira and Rowana were going through.

The whole conversation was quite touching and slightly emotional. Boxxy's head wasn't in it, because of the troubling reports it received regarding its new familiar.

According to Snack, Arms, and Ambrosia, Claws apparently tried to build herself a lair or nest of some sort, which involved webbing up a part of the dungeon's interior. Her stalker body allowed her to produce a near-unlimited amount of sticky spider silk that shot out from her palms in thick, sturdy ropes. She could also discharge the same stuff from the tips of her claws in thin, fine strands. The stalker was then able to spend MP to alter the strands' elasticity, thickness, or stickiness at will, all as part of her Webspinner Skill.

Boxxy initially failed to see this as an issue. Those webs were conjured entirely through magic, which meant they would disappear into nothingness after a short while. However, a stalker's webbing seemed to be special. Apparently, this sticky silk could persist for weeks or maybe even months if left undisturbed, even if the demon that created them was sent back to the Beyond. Still, the Dryad's Domain had been established within an incredibly spacious cavity in Ambrosia's trunk, so it wasn't as if Claws's hobby was getting in the way.

The real trouble had begun when Snack realized that her new co-contractor's webs looked, in the succubus's own words, 'deliciously flammable.' She had then proceeded to test this theory out by flinging a Fireball at the barn-sized mass of stalker-silk that Claws had spent all morning making. Snack's hunch proved right when the entire thing went up in flames, blazing out of existence in a matter of seconds. This naturally made the spider-girl incredibly pissed off, as she had been planning to mope about in her new spider-home until Boxxy returned to the dungeon.

The shapeshifter's orders prevented the stalker from resolving this matter by murdering the ever-loving crap out of the slutty pyromaniac. Claws

instead handled this dilemma by paralyzing Snack with her Venomous Sting, wrapping her up in a cocoon of webs, and hanging her from a high branch somewhere outside the dungeon. The succubus eventually recovered enough to burn off her bonds, but the two of them were clearly at each other's throats.

Arms, on the other hand, had reached some sort of silent agreement with Claws, and the two avoided each other completely. A physical confrontation between them was just impossible, as the fiend was the worst type of combatant a stalker demon could go up against—stubborn, sturdy, and armored enough to deflect her attacks. Even if Claws's natural weapons were sharp enough to slice through meat and bone, they were nowhere near durable enough to penetrate the metallic plating that fiends could manifest.

Bottom line was, while Arms and Snack got along with one another, Claws was left as something of an outcast. Boxxy decided this could not be allowed to continue, as it was steadily learning that interpersonal relationships could make or break an otherwise outstanding adventurer team. That wasn't quite the same as a group of monsters and demons bound together by a bunch of magical contracts, but some of it still held true. Even if the three demons could be ordered to work together, true cooperation was not something that could be made possible through contracts alone.

Come to think of it, didn't something like this happen before? Boxxy thought back on when it first acquired Arms, and the outright hostile way she treated Snack over the next few days. Although the then-mimic lacked the mental capacity and emotional understanding to notice or care about their relationship, it could not recognize just how bad it had been. The succubus and fiend had not gotten along the slightest, and that was putting it lightly. Though they still bickered about this and that every now and then, their relationship had become significantly less hostile since then. The catalyst that allowed for such a thing to happen had been Boxxy's permission to allow its familiars to sort their issues out among themselves as fellow demons.

Therefore, the solution to this latest interpersonal conflict was a simple one.

"Just for today, I'm allowing you to kill, maim and murder your fellow familiars all you want."

The shapeshifter sent the same mental command to Snack, Arms, and Claws. It then made sure to turn on the auto-repair function of the dungeon's Terrain Sculpting module, and told Ambrosia to record what was about to happen with the Surveillance Net. This put a temporary strain on the core's MP reserves, but it would allow Boxxy to review the footage later and get a better idea of what its demons were capable of. Ideally, the shapeshifter would've liked to observe the festivities as they unfolded, but was currently preoccupied with the hunting and tracking exercises that Keira had been assigned.

The truly difficult part of Faehorn's classes was practicing the Marksman Martial Arts. Activating them was simple enough, almost as if casting a Spell with one's body, but the problem was they could trigger the Chaotic Disposition Skill's random magical effects. There was this one time when the Skill caused a small, localized earthquake around Keira, or when it suddenly turned her body invisible, but not her equipment. Boxxy had been able to keep such side-effects hidden for the moment, but that Skill was an accident waiting to happen. After all, something like a newbie Ranger suddenly bursting into flames for no discernable reason was bound to invite the wrong kind of attention, especially if said newbie emerged unscathed. The young doppelganger was therefore forced to make every plausible excuse it could think of to avoid using any of those Martial Arts while other people were around.

Since part of the day's exercise was a light hunt, Boxxy's Ranger Job finally reached Level 15. It picked up the Whisper Wind Skill, which could be used to stealthily communicate with others at long distances. Boxxy was not very enthusiastic about it, as it really didn't need such a Skill. However, it was a necessity for fitting in as Keira. Faehorn was training them up to be scouts and spotters, so this Skill was mandatory in his opinion. If it wasn't for that guy, Boxxy would have definitely opted for the Magic Arrows Skill instead, which could be used to conjure specialty ammunition out of thin air. But, in the end, the Ranger Job's main function was to serve as Keira's cover, so it was not that big a deal if Boxxy picked up a few less-than-stellar Skills. Besides, it wasn't as if these abilities were completely useless. Whisper Wind could, for instance, be used to stealthily communicate with

Fizzy or the shapeshifter's Mirror Images, who couldn't hear its mental commands.

Once class was done for the day, Keira hit the library, this time to study up on the various Gods and their respective taboos. The monster's FTH Attribute would grow steadily over time thanks to the various All Attribute bonuses it earned on a regular basis, but it had to be careful of accidentally contracting Taboo again. Thankfully, the Consortium's extensive library had plenty of information regarding the divine beings that made up Terrania's pantheon. The only exception was Nobunaga, the God of Change. Boxxy's patron was considered a minor deity shrouded in obscurity, so his motivations, likes, and dislikes were largely unknown to the general public. That was hardly an issue though, as a certain Champion of Chaos would be more than happy to regale Boxxy with Timothy's lore.

For the time being, however, the shapeshifter focused on reading up about the asshole that had given it so much trouble last night. The being was Goroth, the God of Earth and patron deity of artists, artisans and craftsmen. Much like Fizzy explained yesterday, he was the type that favored honest, hard work above all else, and despised those who sought shortcuts by perverting the earth's most precious gifts. In practical terms, this meant that any mortal who permanently transmuted something into silver, gold, platinum, mithril, orichalcum, or sinium would catch Taboo because of Goroth.

This was the part where Boxxy got slightly derailed, as it had never heard of those last two metals. The order they were listed seemed to suggest that they would be even shinier than mithril, so it was eager to find out more. Thinking this a good opportunity, the shapeshifter visited the forges and workshops of the Hammers of Horkensaft guild and started asking around. Apparently, orichalcum was mithril that had been altered by prolonged exposure to mana from its environment, which also infused it with an inherent elemental property. It was, for lack of a better term, a Ranked-Up version of mithril with over a dozen variants.

This 'sinium' thing turned out to be something of a mystery, though. It was allegedly the ultimate in magical metal, also known as 'god steel.' Legends said it had been 'suffused with the divine energy of creation' or something

along those lines. However, nobody at the guild had ever seen let alone worked with this mythical material. The only additional information that Keira's continued inquiries managed to unearth was that its color was a pale blue, akin to a clear midday sky. That didn't tell Boxxy whether sinium was actually shiny or not, which left it a bit disappointed.

With that distraction dealt with, Keira headed over to the workshop, where Fizzy said she would be making a practical demonstration of what Artificers actually did. The catgirl used this lecture to openly express interest in becoming an Artificer, and to publicly befriend the radiant golem. This way Keira would have an excuse to linger around Boxxy's favorite shiny while also making use of custom-made tools, gadgets and weapons.

Realizing it had gotten a bit sidetracked yet again, Boxxy discretely asked the Paladin about their God's Taboo. Fizzy revealed that the Goddess of Dice Rolls had a raging hate-bucket for anyone that dabbled in time travel. Whether such an act was actually possible was another topic entirely, but the shapeshifter didn't care either way. All it wanted to do was keep itself from unintentionally voiding its Hero title, and something ridiculous like time travel seemed easy enough to avoid.

Having obtained this information, the beastkin-shaped monster returned to the library and spent the next hour compiling a comprehensive list of things that would earn it a loss of FTH.

Turning unshiny things into shiny things – Goroth, God of Earth
Participating or assisting in time travel – That Guy
Mating with monsters or animals as an enlightened – Nyrie, Goddess of Nature and Fertility
Breaking an oath made in her name – Teresa, Goddess of Truth and Justice
Using Hexcraft or creating cursed items – Lunar, Goddess of Learning and Magic
Participating or assisting in the genocide of an enlightened race – Solus, God of Life
War crimes (i.e. randomly killing prisoners of war) – Axel, God of War and Combat
Desecrating the dead (eating them doesn't count) – Mortimer, God of Death and Commerce

Dealing irreparable damage to the environment – Zephyra, Goddess of Rain

Overall, this had been a very productive afternoon, as Boxxy was sure it would have unknowingly violated Axel's taboo at some point in the future if it hadn't researched it. The rest were more-or-less easily avoidable, but there were a few sore points. One of them was Nyrie's Taboo, which seemed to ban the sort of sexual relationship Rowana had with Keira. Though Boxxy was, for whatever reason, exempt from that rule, the elf most definitely was not. Yet, she clearly was not marked with Taboo, despite the fact that she repeatedly and eagerly had sex with a shapeshifting monster.

A bit of further digging revealed that all of the godly rules Boxxy had noted would only incur a loss in FTH and Levels in Taboo if they were violated *willingly* and *knowingly*. In fact, the phrase 'willingly and knowingly' was present in all of their official definitions, but the shapeshifter omitted those words from its notes for brevity's sake. In any event, this meant that Rowana was safe from being automatically branded a heretic because she wasn't aware that her girlfriend was a shapeshifting monstrosity.

It was also debatable whether what the two of them did could be considered 'mating' since it was impossible for them to conceive a child, but that was a moot point.

What was far more important was that this 'willingly and knowingly' caveat had spared Boxxy from being branded as an incorrigible heretic for what it had done back at Monotal. It was pretty sure that wiping out over eight thousand humans in one go might have broken the 'no genocide' rule of the Sun God, Solus. This one was admittedly a bit iffy, since it wasn't as if the shapeshifter specifically targeted humans. Regardless of that technicality, the devastating effect that detonation had on the surrounding environment would have surely been a major violation of Zephyra's Taboo.

But, since the nameless mimic at the time had had no idea what would actually happen when the overloaded dungeon core went off, it hadn't *knowingly* trashed the environment. A loophole, yes, but not one that the shapeshifter could exploit. Boxxy was now fully aware of what an exploding dungeon core would do, so a repeat of that would doubtlessly

earn it a substantial Level of Taboo. It also slightly berated itself regarding the Unholy Wealth thing. If it had just tested that cursed cup on an actual person instead of Kora's conjured form, then it could have gotten a 'free' golden skeleton.

At least there seemed to be nothing stopping it from keeping the one it had obtained the previous night, seeing as it had already been 'paid for.'

Boxxy just started walking home from the Consortium building when it realized that, much to its surprise, none of its three familiars had been sent back to the Beyond. After checking in with Ambrosia, it learned that there had been a violent confrontation between them, but one that had been resolved without any fatalities. She had, of course, recorded the entire thing, as per Boxxy's instructions. Curious as to what exactly had gone down, the shapeshifter ducked into a public restroom and remotely reviewed the data through the dungeon's Surveillance Net.

The recording in question was about eight minutes long, and started with the succubus and the stalker fighting one another mere moments after Boxxy had given them permission to do so. The battle started with a good view of the arachnid's Stalk Skill in action. The ability was like an upgraded version of Stealth, in that it both muffled sounds and obscured the user's body in a thin layer of black mist that made it easier to hide in the shadows. Though Snack could see in the dark quite well, she still struggled immensely to keep track of Claws as she skittered all over the floor, walls, and ceiling.

Boxxy watched the footage with increasing glee as both of its familiars showed off what they could do. Snack did an admirable job of zoning out her opponent with area effect Spells, despite not knowing her exact position. She also used her Molten Guardian to cover her blind spots and flew up into the air to keep out of the stalker's range whenever Claws made a move. Her Pyromancer magic also rendered the spider-girl's webbing a non-factor, depriving Claws of her main means of attacking at range.

Yet, despite the stalker's inability to land any worthwhile hits, Claws proved herself to be an incredibly elusive target. She hadn't suffered a single direct hit from Snack's magic, despite the ridiculous number of fiery projectiles being tossed around. The way she dodged around made it seem

like she could predict where the succubus was aiming at even before she finished chanting her Spells. Even when it looked like Snack's flames were about to envelop her, Claws would simply disperse the magic by slicing it apart with her claws and back-scythes.

That particular feat was made possible by the Counterspell Skill. The ability did exactly what its name suggested, but worked by briefly imbuing the stalker's limbs with anti-magical properties. This meant the Skill required a good bit of timing and precision pull off successfully. The demon called Drea was clearly an expert at using it though, so that hadn't been a problem for her. The real issue was that Counterspell could not be used indefinitely, which had allowed the succubus to land a total of eight hits on the reddish spider-demon. Namely, two Fireball explosions, three magma Missiles, a pair of Infernos, and a point-blank Flamethrower that Claws had been goaded into. She would've surely died if not for her passive and self-explanatory Magic Resistance Skill.

However, those eight were only but a fraction of the hundreds of Spells Snack had unleashed. She had done an impressive job managing her MP reserves while avoiding injury, but she eventually began running out of fuel, forcing her to reduce the frequency of her attacks. Eventually she was also forced to abandon her Molten Guardian, as she could no longer sustain it.

Claws capitalized on this opportunity by using her webbing as a slingshot to launch herself directly at the succubus. The stalker effortlessly diffused the desperate Fireball Snack threw at her, after which she finally managed to get close enough to the slippery seductress to web up her mouth. With the Molten Guardian gone, Snack had no way of burning off the gag that prevented her from chanting, and was too physically and mentally exhausted to fly out of the way before Claws kicked her in the chest.

Or rather, it was more accurate to say that Claws had *stabbed* the succubus in the chest.

The spider-demon then proceeded to use her many bladed appendages to rip off Snack's wings, cut open her belly, bite down on her neck and cut off an arm, all in the span of a few seconds. She then cocooned the thoroughly beaten succubus and dragged her off somewhere.

The recording cut off at that point. Boxxy didn't usually get a chance to scrutinize Snack's fighting ability, so it was rather surprised at just how adept she was. Unfortunately, Claws clearly had the upper hand when it came to experience. She had cleverly applied mental and physical pressure on her opponent, making her waste more MP than necessary to defend herself. The stalker steadily and patiently exhausted her prey until a decisive blow could be made, and flawlessly seized the opportunity when the time was right.

In summary, Claws was in complete control of the fight from the start. It was almost frightening to think that this was the same embarrassed, awkward girl that Boxxy had met earlier that morning. That cold, methodical, and calculating side of her was exactly the sort of killer her master aspired to be, and it genuinely thought it could learn a lot from her. Her execution hadn't been flawless as she had taken a few seemingly unintended hits.

However, as Faehorn liked to say, no plan survived contact with the enemy, and the stalker most definitely had one of those. In fact, the main contributing factor to her victory was without a doubt her overwhelming advantage in the information department. Claws was clearly intimately familiar with Snack's fighting style, likely because she had seen her fight numerous times on the Boxxy Show. On the other hand, the succubus had been forced to spend time and energy studying her opponent. A second bout between the two would likely play out very differently.

Which, incidentally, raised a rather vital question—was a rematch actually necessary?

"Claws," Boxxy called out telepathically.

"Heeek! Y-yes, Master?"

"What do you think of Snack after you had a little fun with her?"

"Oh, she's fantastic," she said in a strangely chipper tone. "I'm starting to understand why you favor her so."

Boxxy was pretty sure it didn't really favor Snack one way or another. Even if she was a skilled infiltrator and tasted great, she still had a number of

downsides that made her unreliable and unpredictable at times. Arms, though inflexible, was a lot easier to control. All Boxxy had to do was point her at a thing it wanted smashed and the thing would get smashed, no questions asked.

“So, are you going to get along with her now?” the shapeshifter pressed

“Oh, most definitely. In fact, I think I may be falling in love with her!”

Well, that was… probably a good thing. What about the other side of the story, though?

“Snack, what about you?”

“What do you mean, Master?” the succubus responded, confused.

“Oh, right.”

Each familiar had their own telepathic ‘channel,’ so Snack would not have been privy to Boxxy’s conversation with Claws. It was only a slight inconvenience in the grand scheme of things, but the shapeshifter had difficulty remembering that at times.

“I’m asking whether you and Claws worked out your differences.”

“I would say so, Master,” Xera calmly replied. “We’ve been talking and hanging out ever since I lost, and I think we’ll be able to work together quite well in the future.”

“Excellent. And where are you now?”

“The two of us are having a bath together in the dungeon. It’s quite enjoyable.”

“Is having a bath really that tasty?”

Keira had to take baths to clean herself, but it just felt like a chore.

“It’s the dryad’s special Waters of Life that make it tasty for us, Master.”

“How so?”

“Well, apparently it’s potent enough to help regrow lost limbs in an instant.”

“Oh? That is very good to hear.”

As a shapeshifter, Boxxy didn't have to worry about such things since it could move and mold its body mass around as needed. Its demons were also not greatly perturbed by the loss of body parts, as they could just be re-summoned. Even Fizzy said she would probably be fine if she lost an arm or something since golems could be repaired so long as their core remained intact. Admittedly, she'd need to find a skilled golem engineer to fix her up, but there were plenty of those in the Horkensaft Kingdom to the east.

However, elves and humans were different, and something like losing a leg or an eye was a permanent injury in most cases. The only thing that could fully restore a lost limb, or at least the only one that Boxxy was aware of, was a Rejuvenation Potion. Even then, the concoction supposedly burned off a significant portion of one's life force, effectively reducing their lifespan by an entire decade. It was quite expensive to boot. Alternatively, one could try to replace their lost limb with a magical prosthetic, which was more accessible but also far from ideal.

But the dryad's miraculous Waters of Life were different. Ambrosia herself said producing them was not too difficult for a tree of her age and size, so this opened up a lot of possibilities. Boxxy could potentially rake in a lot of profit if it opened some sort of spa or clinic, but such things carried risks of their own. It had to carefully evaluate how viable such a business endeavor would be, but that was a concern for the future. What it needed right now was the answer to a rather pointed question.

"Snack, how did you find out about this property of the Waters of Life?"

"The dryad let us know herself, Master," came the immediate response.

"Strange, she didn't mention it to me."

"Perhaps Master didn't ask?"

"That is true."

Ambrosia had not yet taken up her position as dungeon master when the topic of the Waters of Life was discussed, and it simply hadn't come up since then. So then, the fact that she told Snack unprovoked meant the dryad felt there was a reason to point that out. Quickly checking up on the pair of demons using the Surveillance Net revealed what that reason was.

“Actually Snack, I think I will be joining you for that bath after all.”

“Oh? Please do, Master. I’m sure both of us would enjoy that greatly.”

The images relayed by the dungeon core showed that Snack was, as expected, submerged in the green-tinged water of life. And Claws was in there with her, taking huge bites out of the succubus’s delicious flesh, which healed back within seconds. It was a scene that left Boxxy with a rather un-tasty thought.

How come I didn’t think of that?

Part Three

In the depths of the Dryad's Domain, a certain pair of demons soaked in an impromptu hot-tub. Well, it was actually closer to a small pond, as it was roughly and hurriedly carved out of the wooden floor with Terrain Sculpting. Ambrosia provided the green-tinted Waters of Life, and Xera's magical flames kept it pleasantly hot. As for the stalker the succubus shared this moment with, she was in the middle of exploring some rather… *intimate* relations with the blue-skinned Pyromancer.

Unfortunately, said 'intimate relations' hadn't been anywhere near as fun as the pair had imagined they would be.

Xera was disappointed to learn that a stalker devouring her flesh did not bring her the same satisfaction as having Boxxy do it. The fact that her beloved was not the one performing this act was part of the problem, but it was also because Drea was just too neat of an eater. She would typically slice off a leg or arm and enjoy munching on it while submerged almost completely underwater. While it was deliciously painful to have her flesh and bones severed, it sadly didn't last long as the Waters of Life quickly healed the otherwise-crippling injury in a flash. After all, the cuts Drea made healed much faster and smoother than the sort of horrific tear a certain ravenous mimic might make.

Drea, on the other hand greatly, enjoyed Xera's flavor. She expected the succubus to be delicious based on what she had seen on the Boxxy Show, but unlike her new master, she needed more than simple flavor. While the shapeshifter seemed content to just enjoy the fleeting taste of a demon's conjured flesh, a stalker required something that could actually fill their belly. Drea was no different, which was why she agreed to this little… bonding exercise.

But, as things stood, the only thing the she-stalker's current feeding frenzy accomplished was leaving her feeling strangely frustrated and disappointed. Xera served as a great appetizer, but once the novelty had worn off, which didn't really take long, Drea was left with an ever-increasing craving for some actual meat, blood, and guts to sink her mandibles into. To a demon as

gluttonous as a stalker, the whole thing was like foreplay with no payoff. Yet, Drea kept stubbornly gnawing on Xera's succulent flesh, determined to get the most out of the experience.

She was just about to call it quits, when Boxxy called in to check on her, much to the spider-girl's surprised delight. They spoke briefly, after which it must have exchanged words with Xera, seeing as her face suddenly lit up.

"I've got good news!" the succubus declared. "Master said it will be joining us in the bath."

"W-what?! Like, now?!"

Drea tossed the half-eaten leg she was gnawing on aside and proceeded to spin and flail around in a panic, splashing Waters of Life all over the place.

"B-b-but why?! How?!" she stammered. "Tktktktktk! A bath with *the* Boxxy T. Morningwood?! M-m-my heart's not ready for this! Tktktktktk!"

"We don't even have those."

"That's not the point! I mean, Master will definitely want to s-s-s-sample me, right?!"

"Uh… Huh."

Now that Xera thought about it, it was rather strange that her Master hadn't taste-tested its new familiar right away. It did so both with herself and that moronic fiend, yet hadn't even batted an eye at Drea. Boxxy had never been one to hold back, which could only mean one thing—if it hadn't done so immediately, then it likely had no intention of ever doing so.

"Actually no, I don't think that'll happen," the succubus concluded.

"But what will I do if he t-t-tries me and finds my flavor displeasing?!"

"*That's* what you're worried about?!" asked Xera with a dumbfounded expression.

"Of course, I am! I don't want to sully his refined taste buds with anything foul! Spiders in general taste terrible, and I'm probably no different! Gah, if only I knew for sure! Tktktktktktk… Oh wait, I know!"

Drea unhesitantly ripped off her own leg and brought it up to her face while a new limb grew back to replace it. The stalker's lower jaw unhinged similarly to a snake's, revealing the many sharp, pointy teeth she normally kept hidden behind her lips. Her maw was now so wide that it looked big enough to eat a person's head in two, maybe three bites. Drea then used that terrifying abyss to take a sizable bite out of her own thigh.

She then chewed on it.

Once.

"Pthooey!" she spat out, tossing the limb away in the process. "Bleh! I knew it! I'm disgusting! Now the Master will hate meeee! Waaaahahaaah!"

The succubus was speechless. Not only did this bug just attempt self-cannibalism, but she also started wailing in despair over the thought her mortal master might dislike her. Was this really the behavior of a demon who was senior to her in both age and experience? Now that she thought about, it was extremely likely this hardened assassin was a total greenhorn when it came to interpersonal relations.

After all, stalkers were socially awkward loners that were never seen by mortals under normal circumstances. That matron of theirs was a prime example, but also an extreme case. While Overlord Liusolra hated being seen by everyone and everything, the rest of her species didn't particularly mind being in the company of other demons. They didn't exactly like it, but they didn't outright hate it either. Point was, they were all immensely fidgety and socially awkward, but this was the first time Xera had seen or even heard of one of these arachnid terrors outright sob.

"Now there's no way in the Beyond he will like meee-heee!"

Something in Xera's head clicked when she heard those words. The succubus had been ignoring it for a while now, but she now noticed that Drea referred to Boxxy, a notoriously sexless creature, as 'he' and 'him.' It was a small thing, but Xera realized this implied that new girl saw her own master as a romantic interest. This implied that her earlier declaration of love had been, in fact, genuine affection, rather than a confused appetite.

That said, ‘love’ was probably too strong a word for what this stalker felt. Her behavior was like that of a fangirl, a maiden fawning over some famous person she’d only seen from afar. No wonder why she flailed around like an epileptic squirrel earlier—she was freaking out over the thought of having the object or her distant adoration suddenly give her personal attention. It was both sad and pathetic, but Xera would be lying if she said she didn’t understand her new colleague’s feelings.

The succubus was now certain that what Drea really wanted was acceptance and praise from the one she admired. This was a good thing, as it was a lot better than the other two familiars’ initial assumption that she wished to devour their master. Upon determining the stalker’s motives, Xera decided to do what she thought was best for her beloved Boxxy. If this confused spider-girl could be persuaded into becoming a truly loyal server like herself and, to a lesser extent, that brick-brained brawler, then that would only increase their master’s chances of survival.

Boxxy surviving for as long as chestily possible was of utmost importance to Xera, and not just because she didn’t wish to see her beloved disappear. The shapeshifter was maturing at an incredibly rapid rate, both intellectually and emotionally. There was no telling what sort of Skills, Perks, or Rank Ups it might acquire. All things considered, Xera felt as if there was, as the God of Chaos would put it, a ‘non-zero chance’ of that monster eventually developing the ability to both receive and reciprocate romantic feelings. Boxxy would need to continue living for a long, *long* time for that to happen though, hence why it was Xera’s self-appointed duty to ensure its continued survival.

Even if it meant ‘sharing’ the monster with this naive spider-girl with a screw loose.

“There, there, it’s okay, sweetie,” said Xera with a reassuring pat on the shoulder. “Taste isn’t everything Master cares about.”

“Really?” Drea asked between her half-sobs, half-cries. “Th-then there’s a chance he’ll like me anyway?!”

“Of course. You just have to make yourself seem ‘shiny’ enough.”

“Oh! Like that tiny Paladin?!”

“No, dearie, not quite as literally as that.”

Her carapace had some potential in that regard, but she had no hope of matching the luster of Fizzy’s mithril frame. Even Xera had to admit that golem looked absolutely fabulous.

“You just need to make yourself useful and help Master’s treasure hoard grow,” she clarified. “If you do that, then it will be sure to think of you as useful.”

The stalker’s eyes suddenly went wide as she realized something.

“I see, I see! Of course, there was that method as well! As expected of Master, he really thought of everything! Thanks so much for the talk, Snack! You’re the bestktktktktk!”

Drea lunged forward and wrapped her arms around Xera. She planted a big, fat kiss on the startled succubus’s lips. Well, a ‘kiss’ in stalker terms, which meant she had actually bitten the lower half of Xera’s face clean off, but neither of them particularly minded it.

Once the two calmed down a bit, the succubus proceeded to thoroughly instruct the newcomer on how to best serve Boxxy and anticipate its wishes. Even if it had gotten smarter and better at expressing itself lately, it hadn’t stopped incessantly referring to things as either ‘tasty’ or ‘shiny’ when it wasn’t in character. Well, Drea didn’t need much schooling on that. The stalker apparently hadn’t missed a single episode of the Boxxy Show, though she did have few misconceptions.

Apparently, most demons, Drea included, believed the shapeshifter had a thing for large-breasted females. An erroneous assumption to be sure, although an expected one considering the company it kept. What *was* surprising, however, was the fact that its catgirl act was so good that it completely fooled a significant number of viewers into thinking its displays of affection towards Rowana were genuine. Hearing the truth only made Drea’s opinion of her new master soar even higher. Not only was it hiding in plain sight, but it was doing so in a way she had no hope of pulling off. Realizing it was spinning its own web of lies and deceit all this time made her bug-eyes almost literally sparkle with admiration.

That was hardly the main reason she felt attracted to it, though. It was the way Boxxy hunted with a focus on ambushing, murdering, and then eating up its prey without giving it a chance to fight back. On the rare occasions that ambushing its target failed, it would wear it down by striking from multiple angles and using any means available to keep its opponent confused and off-balance the entire time. It behaved so much like a stalker, that at some point Drea stopped thinking of it as a box with legs and instead viewed it as a spider with a chest-shaped thorax. Also, those imitation limbs that served as its preferred mode of transportation were, in her own words, 'incredibly handsome.' The fact that it was also the Progenitor's chosen Hero was icing on the cake.

The stalker then spent the next few minutes psyching herself up. This time, she would greet it properly. She would show her value and walk by its side with pride.

All that motivation and determination disappeared the instant Boxxy arrived, as Drea bolted up to the nearby cavern wall and skittered away at full speed. In the end, she could not work up the courage to present herself before her Master unless she was ordered to. Not that Boxxy had any intention of doing that anyway. Much like Xera had deduced, it had already anticipated she would taste horrible. Not only was she part spider, but also a demon. Every single demon that Boxxy had taken a bite of had terrible flavor. Aside from Snack, of course, which was why it was there in the first place.

Since it had already dined on a small herd of sheep just outside of the city, it didn't have any of Drea's conundrums regarding the fullness of its stomach and gladly feasted on the ever-regenerating succubus's body. Unlike the spider-girl, it did so viciously and violently, tearing off huge parts of her with the jagged, misaligned teeth of a mimic. This finally gave Xera the satisfaction she craved, as it had been far too long since her Master had abused her so thoroughly. The agony of having her bones violently crushed and her flesh forcefully ripped apart by Boxxy was what she truly desired, and she was finally getting an extra-sized helping of it.

The faux-mimic also found this prolonged 'snack time' considerably better than usual. The fact it could keep eating its favorite Snack seemingly

without end was both greatly enjoyable and strangely relaxing. Was that latter part due to the effects of the lukewarm, demon-blood-stained Waters of Life? Baths being relaxing generally made sense from an enlightened point of view, but Boxxy never saw it as anything more than a chore. Perhaps this situation proved that even tedious things like baths were enjoyable, if one had the right company to share them with. That said, the shapeshifter could do without Claws staring intently at it from the far end of the chamber. Come to think of it, it was about time to put that stalker to work.

In the following days, Boxxy ordered Drea to follow it around town during the daytime. She was told to keep herself out of sight while the doppelganger played around with the elves under the guise of Keira. It served as both a test of just how good her hiding abilities were, and as insurance. It was good to have her on hand, in case Boxxy wanted something or someone to disappear instantly and without a trace. Such a thing wasn't likely to happen in these relatively peaceful streets, but the spider-girl was still overjoyed at the prospect. Stalkers gotta stalk, after all.

Boxxy completely understood and sympathized with the spider-girl's monstrous urges. Unlike her previous masters, it wholeheartedly encouraged that behavior, just as Drea hoped. In the past, she would usually only be called out to fight monsters or to help cut through some magical barrier or obstacle. Actual tracking and assassination assignments, which were both her forte and her favorite, hadn't been all that common. It wasn't as if she hadn't been previously contracted to devious, ill-meaning bastards that needed people disappeared. The problem was that they were either too stupid to survive the criminal underworld, or too afraid to bear the responsibility of ordering a demon to take another's life.

This time was different. No matter how deplorable or evil, none of Drea's previous masters could hold a candle to the ruthless awesomeness of Boxxy T. Morningwood. Watching it completely fool and bedazzle every single person it interacted with was endlessly enthralling from the she-stalker's perspective. The way that man-eater freely communicated with those it saw as nothing more than food was truly awe-inspiring. It honestly made the

stalker a little bit envious of how confidently it spouted an endless stream of lies and bullshit, as she would never be able to do that.

And just when she thought she couldn't like her Master even more, Boxxy finally gave Drea a new set of orders regarding her nightly duties.

These instructions involved helping Ambrosia out with her endless pest problems. Although those termites were a hylt tree's greatest enemy, they were hardly the only vermin around. The gigantic tree's canopy was a place very few elves ever visited due to how impractical and remote it was. That vast sea of leaves and branches was therefore allowed to thrive and develop almost completely undisturbed by civilization, and had become its own ecosystem. It quite literally crawled with all manner of annoying vermin that Ambrosia couldn't get out of her literal and figurative hair.

The biggest offenders were tri-horned beetles, crimson cicadas, armored caterpillars, and a few other oversized insectoid monsters. Apparently, these giant bugs constantly chipped away at her bark, drank up her sap, and feasted on her leaves and fruits. Such things grew back rapidly due to the hylt tree's nearly limitless vitality, so the amount of damage they did was incomparable to the threat of an out-of-control termite infestation. They also had natural predators in the form of the gigantic, eagle-like birds called rocs that kept their numbers in check. In reality, their presence was an annoyance at best. So, the dryad mostly ignored them. At least until Boxxy asked whether it was okay to sweep all of them away, to which she eagerly agreed. In fact, even those birds were not blameless in her eyes, as they often broke off bits of branches and foliage to make their nests.

It was thus that the gluttonous Drea was unleashed upon this high-altitude biome. She mercilessly hunted and ate every single insect she came across, devouring them with great gusto. Even the rocs became her meals after succumbing to her poison and webs. And the more she fed on their entrails, the more her Blood Gorger Skill boosted her physical abilities. The dryad even offered to let the demon avail herself of the copious amounts of sickeningly-sweet, overripe fruit that hung from her topmost branches. Stalkers were not picky eaters, unlike a certain mimic-turned-doppelganger, so the spider-girl eagerly scarfed those down as well.

All things said and done, Drea's nightly feeding frenzies were the stuff of legends. Her appetite easily surpassed even that of her gluttonous Master. She still took Xera's advice to heart and set aside much of the juiciest Roc meat as a present to Boxxy, but even then the amount of food she devoured was many times her own weight. In fact, it was far too much, even by stalker standards. This no longer seemed to be a matter of her own enjoyment. Well, she did find joy in the act of stuffing her face, but the main reason she did that so vehemently was because it was a necessary step towards fulfilling her Master's wishes.

A stalker's seemingly bottomless pit of a stomach did actually digest everything deposited inside it. It did so at a very rapid rate, although it wasn't because it was necessary to sustain the demon's body. The extracted nutrients would instead be stored up and then used to produce a type of enchanted spider thread that was different from the one Drea used against Xera, and was something Boxxy knew about well in advance due to the high Level of its Demonology Skill.

This special lavender-colored thread would not fade with the passage of time and was actually a very valuable material. While incredibly flammable in its raw form, that drawback went away once it was properly processed and woven into a fabric that was unimaginatively called 'demon silk.' It was a sturdy, slash-resistant cloth that was perfect for housing enchantments. The material was used to make either high-quality adventurer gear, such as cloaks, pouches and robes, or expensive luxury items, such as gowns, suits, carpets, and tapestries. Although Drea herself lacked the ability to make anything other than webs, she could still produce rolls of silken thread that could be sold at a very good price.

The reason it was so expensive was that, even though all stalkers could make it, they were a relatively uncommon choice of familiar. Not to mention that it was also normally quite difficult to feed them to the extent where they could produce it at a constant rate. The conversion ratio, so to speak, of nutrients to thread was so bad that many Warlocks didn't even bother. Stalkers also hated being used exclusively as demon silk factories, and actively angering one's demonic familiars was pretty high up on the list of things an adventurer should not do.

Drea's situation was a special one, though. For one thing, she was eager to impress her new master even if it meant doing something she would normally despise. Food was also a non-issue, as Ambrosia's canopy had plenty of meat and fruit to keep her pumping out demon silk on a daily basis, which could then be sold or traded in exchange for shinies. The main issue Boxxy faced was that it currently lacked a secure way of pawning off the demon silk, so it decided to stockpile the stuff until a buyer could be found.

Another potential problem was that Claws seemed to be a bit overzealous in her binge-feeding, which could've resulted in her driving out all of the creatures in Ambrosia's canopy. This was worrisome, as it could be seen as permanently damaging the tiny ecosystem that lived up there, putting Boxxy at risk of contracting Taboo by breaking Zephyra's divine law. Thankfully, there were eleven more ancient hylt trees in Azurvale, and the 'ganger' was fairly certain none their dryads would complain about some unsolicited pest control.

So, all things considered, the demon doing all the actual work was incredibly satisfied by her new routine. She got to watch Boxxy spin a web of lies and deceit from afar during the day and ate outrageous amounts of varied and delicious foods at night. She even had a way to appeal to the monster she admired by making herself 'shiny,' as Xera put it. Boxxy even allowed her to use her regular thread to build a nest for herself within Ambrosia's uppermost branches, if she really wanted to.

And did she ever want to.

Drea's new 'home' rapidly grew large enough to be considered a mansion, although she didn't make it with practicality in mind. She just wanted to have a place she could call her own, somewhere she could laze about and peacefully digest her meal while producing her thread. It really was not her intention to capture and ensnare wandering prey. Granted, that did end up happening anyway, though Drea wasn't about to complain about the free food. Ambrosia was perfectly fine with it too, as the stalker's webs did not inconvenience her in the slightest. In fact, some small part of her was quite pleased with her new oversized 'hair ornament,' though that might have been the dungeon core talking.

All things said and done, the newest addition to Boxxy's little house of monsters fit in surprisingly well. She diligently performed her duties and seemed to get along with both Snack and Ambrosia. In fact, it sometimes found the three of them chatting about something or other during idle periods, although the stalker would immediately vacate the area when she realized Boxxy was nearby.

Even Fizzy had taken an odd liking to the spider girl, despite the two never making eye contact or even speaking. The exotic silk Drea produced seemed to ignite the spark of inspiration within the golem Artificer, and she set out to design and build a machine that could weave it into a fabric all on its own. This was an idea that Boxxy found very tasty, as selling ready-made cloth rather than spools of thread would be easier and more profitable. It therefore ordered the stalker to assist Fizzy with any and all requests she might have in that regard.

That particular conversation had taken place yesterday, and it was now the night of the fifth day after the contract with Claws had been made. Boxxy had traded places with Xera, putting her on Rowana-sitting duty while it filled up on the delicious 'gifts' left behind by the stalker. While not quite as tasty as elves or humans, the huge pile of prime roc meat dripping with blood made for a very satisfying meal. If things carried on this way, then it wouldn't even need to enact that 'fast food' plan it had come up with. To say things were working out better than expected would be a huge understatement.

That's when the shapeshifter had a sudden, worrying thought.

Actually, haven't things been going too *well lately?*

There was that incident with the Taboo Skill, as well as the slight turbulence surrounding Minic's sudden appearance, but both of those incidents were resolved quickly and to a highly satisfying degree. Keira had already established herself as a quirky and lovable rookie, and had both a lover and a slowly growing circle of close friends. So, on the whole, everything was turning up in Boxxy's favor. This, if past experiences were any indication, meant that something was about to go very wrong, and very soon.

"Oh, no you don't!"

“Gaaah!”

Fizzy’s voice rang out from the side, almost as if on cue, followed immediately by an angry shout from Kora. Its dinner thoroughly interrupted, the spider-legged chest stood up and went over to see what all the fuss was about. It saw the golem standing firmly between Claws and Arms. The Paladin was in a combat stance, gripping onto her signature wrench with both hands and sporting an absolutely livid expression on her shiny face. The yellow-green light emanating from her weapon as well as the similarly glowing halo above her head signified she had activated her Divine Wrath Skill. Boxxy didn’t usually care for flashy abilities like that, but it had to admit, it was a big fan of the way the Skill made its prized shiny look even more dazzling than usual. The ability also did some other things of lesser importance, like massively boosting her damage and healing output, but the shiny stuff was what Boxxy really cared about.

The fiend, on the other hand, was curled up on the floor with her face on the wooden ground and her ass in the air. She seemed to be in a huge deal of pain, judging from her groans and how she used all four of her arms to clutch at her lower body. It was quite obvious Fizzy had just hit her with all her might, and the reason for that seemed to be the third person on the scene.

Claws was crouching down on the ground, doing her absolute best to hide behind the much smaller Paladin. Even the six scythes attached to her back were wrapped around her front, as if to shield her from something. She looked like she had been in the process of producing lavender-colored silken strands when she had rudely interrupted.

“What the *fuck* do you think you’re doing?!” Fizzy shouted.

“Ghhhrrrrgh! You tiny bitch,” the doubled-over fiend growled. “If it wasn’t for the Boss’s orders, I’d turn you into scrap.”

“Try me, meatbag!” the golem taunted. “I’m different from how I was back in that forest! I’ll shove this wrench so far up your ass it’ll pop out of your mouth!”

Boxxy decided it was time to intervene, otherwise it wouldn’t be able to enjoy its midnight meal in peace.

“Okay, what’s going on here?”

All three of its servants turned to stare at the creature that brought them together in the first place.

“Claws, you stay right there,” it ordered, preventing the stalker from running off like she usually did.

“Grr! Ain’t nothing, boss,” Arms insisted. “I was just doing my thing when this psycho-”

“Your *thing* is the fucking problem here, bitchnugget!” Fizzy yelled over her.

“Be quiet!” commanded Boxxy. “Nobody speak unless spoken to!”

It really didn’t want or need any of this drama. It just wanted to get to the bottom of the conflict, put an end to it, then get back to its meal. The most efficient way of handling it was to take it one step at a time.

“Arms, why are you on the ground?”

“That little cunt just hit me in the dick!”

It would seem even Kora, who could handle the pain of losing a limb or having a violent box chew on her head like it was nothing, was not exempt from attacks to the groin. That was why her member was normally hidden inside her body in the first place. In other words, if that part had been attacked, then it must have been ‘out’ for some reason.

“Why did you hit her in the dick?” the shapeshifter turned to Fizzy.

“Well,” the golem collected herself, “I asked the new girl to show me how she normally handled and produced that silk of hers, since I needed a reference for my machine. And then this moron came striding in and interrupted the demonstration with her raging boner!”

Boxxy glanced over at Claws who nodded so vigorously, it almost seemed like her head was about to fall off. Her master then rapidly pieced together what had transpired.

Claws could produce two types of spider thread—the white, temporary one she used in combat and the lavender, permanent one necessary to weave

Demon Silk. The former was made entirely through solidified mana and shot out of her hands at will. The latter demanded nutrients and was much closer to the thread of an actual spider. Both were produced by different spinnerets inside her body, which on a regular spider would be located inside their bulbous abdomen, with the silk coming out of a small opening at the end of it.

Claws lacked such a body part, mostly due to her subspecies as a hornet stalker. While there were other types of stalker that were arachnids with a few demonic features, her variant was a humanoid one with arachnid features. This meant that, in order to produce her sticky threads, her spinnerets had to be in places that made sense for her body type. The small ones that conjured her temporary white webbing were, unsurprisingly, in her hands, while the other, more robust type of thread was produced by the larger set of spinnerets in her lower abdomen, near the stomach.

This meant that, much to Drea's embarrassment, the orifice that secreted the second type of spider silk was located firmly between her butt cheeks, right where an anus would normally be. And Arms, being the horny idiot that she was, happened upon the stalker in the middle of her 'demonstration,' and, in true fiend fashion, tried to stick her dick in it. This forced Fizzy to lash out at the big red moron by aiming for the very obvious weak point. This 'argument' had been the commotion that had caught Boxxy's attention.

All of this led up to the shapeshifter witnessing the most ridiculous argument it had ever seen.

"That's *my* silk hole, meatbag!"

"Nuh-uh! That ass is mine! Tell her, boss!"

"My butt is nobody's but my ooooown! Tktktktkt!"

Okay, maybe not *the* most ridiculous, but top five for sure.

Part Four

Arms was instantly banned from, as she put it, ‘sticking it up the spider-pooper,’ since it would interfere with silk production for no good reason. Fizzy questioned why she even bothered with Drea, considering she had Xera on hand to help with her urges. The fiend’s reply made the golem feel even more disgusted at the two-and-a-half-meter-tall meatbag than ever before.

“It’s not as fun if they don’t fight back.”

Kora wanted to force herself on an unwilling partner, and playing around with the succubus didn’t really count.

“I don’t care, keep it in your pants,” was her Master’s response.

Boxxy had already given her much more freedom than any bound familiar could hope for, so she had no right to complain.

“C’mon, boss! Just this once!”

That didn’t stop her from bitching about it anyway. Demons were normally fickle, selfish, ungrateful creatures, so this sort of behavior was expected. Boxxy didn’t particularly mind her attitude, because ‘attitude’ was all she had.

“No,” it repeated. “Now, shut up about it unless you want to spend the next three days hitting yourself in the groin.”

This firm stance on the matter made Drea incredibly relieved. She had seen the gut-displacing size of Kora’s member several times, and was certain she wanted no part of that. In fact, that succubus was most likely the only demon in existence that did. With the matter settled, the shapeshifter let out a quiet sigh. It honestly disliked dealing with this sort of stuff. Having to put on the mask called Keira every day was already mentally exhausting, and there were only so many nights it could pretend to sleep next to Rowana. Piling up stress simply made it harder to focus on actually ‘meditating.’ That was why it had spent more and more time in the dungeon, where it could freely indulge in its hobbies.

Speaking of which, that tasty pile of roc meat was still waiting for it. Boxxy immediately put the thoughts of pointless drama out of its mind and focused entirely on the feast. While it still longed for man-flesh, these birds still made for an excellent substitute. Especially since it had decided to cut down on its hunting of the homeless. While it wasn't quite sure how close it was to being saddled with the Slayer of Elvenkind Perk, it wanted to avoid its negative effects, if at all possible. Those wouldn't be nearly as pronounced as the higher-ranked Butcher of Humanity, but it still wanted to avoid that can of worms for as long as feasibly possible.

In short, the stalker's gift of fresh monster meat was very much appreciated. Therefore, it sent Claws several words of telepathic praise such as, 'Thanks for the meal' and 'Keep up the good work,' to which she eagerly replied with a 'It was my pleasure!' That girl, she seemed to be fine with communicating over the thought-link, but speaking face-to-face was more or less impossible for her. That quirk wasn't much of an issue, since her duties involved being neither seen nor heard.

Claws and Fizzy eventually got back to planning that silk-weaving prototype, while Kora went off to vent her frustrations on anything that wriggled and crawled. As for Boxxy, it was about to swap places with Snack to resume its 'pretending to sleep, but not really' act, when it noticed something strange. It was about the odd-colored wall at one end of the wooden platform in the heart of the dungeon. This area of the cavern wasn't covered in bark-like growths, and Boxxy had agreed not to tamper with it at Ambrosia's request. This bare, beige-colored timber was the central and most vital part of the hylt tree—the heartwood.

Boxxy hadn't really taken a close look at it lately, so it was quite surprised to find that what had been a plain, smooth wall several days ago had been covered in some form of writing. What were undoubtedly letters had been delicately and expertly carved into the otherwise smooth surface, but Boxxy didn't recognize the script. This wasn't all that surprising considering the only language it spoke fluently was Atican, the one commonly used across the continent of Atica. It had also looked up ancient elven writing in the library out of curiosity, and had noted that it shared certain immediate similarities with Atican.

This weird script was completely different, however. The letters looked closer to the magical runes used by Enchanters, but those sigils did not convey information. They were geometric shapes and patterns that helped imbue magic into objects. This carved script looked so completely outside Boxxy's comprehension, it was as if it was looking at a new color for the first time. There was quite a lot of it too, as the writing extended dozens of meters in every direction.

The strangest thing about this situation was that they appeared to have been carved by hand. Not only were such fine details impossible to do with Terrain Sculpting, but there were fresh wood shavings scattered around the place. It then noticed a thick, tentacle-like vine hanging loosely off to the side. It was a type of growth the dryad could create and manipulate at will, so the fact that it was gripping onto a shiny metal knife made it quite clear who was responsible for this literal wall of text. Meaning Boxxy knew full well who to ask regarding this odd phenomenon.

"Ambrosia!" it bellowed, and the dryad's plump figure rose from the floor next to it.

"What is it, milord?" she asked sweetly.

"What's this all about?" it waved a tongue-tentacle at the strange letters.

"Those art the records of milord's teaching and instructions."

"Ah. I see."

Once the monster thought about it, it recalled that the dryad had mentioned something along the lines of 'I shall engrave thy words unto mine heartwood' at one point, hadn't she? It would appear that hadn't been some roundabout way of saying she'd keep Boxxy's words in mind, but had been quite literal about it. This was a problem, as the shapeshifter wasn't comfortable with leaving records of its exploits behind. Even if it lived here for the moment, it imagined it would eventually leave the tree and the dungeon behind, so this carved diary could one day come back to bite it in the bottom.

"But why write it all down? And why here?"

“Because, by doing this I shalt never forget milord’s words of wisdom,” Ambrosia claimed.

“Is it really that hard for you to remember things?”

“’Tis shameful to admit, but the eons hath made mine memory faulty. What thou considers the event of a lifetime is but a fleeting moment from mine perspective.”

Her words made Boxxy thoroughly aware of just how ancient the dryad was. Of course, it already knew that, but it was easy to forget her age considering her relatively youthful appearance. The ‘ganger’ couldn’t exactly sympathize with her, but it understood her problem. Having accumulated memories for literal millennia would probably make anyone have trouble recollecting specific things. If this wall of text was necessary for her to carry out her duties, then it would much rather keep it around.

That did leave one question though, one that Boxxy pondered about for a long time before it finally asked.

“What about the language itself?”

“’Tis an ancient script, milord. One that I believe is much older than even myself.”

“I would assume so, but where does it come from?”

“I cannot say for certain.”

“But you know this language, right? Surely you’d remember how you learned it or who taught it to you.”

Even if her memory wasn’t the greatest, surely something as significant as that would leave at least some kind of lasting impression.

“I truly cannot say, milord,” she shook her head. “I know ‘tis strange, but I feel as though I hath always known these letters.”

“Well, that’s helpful,” it sarcastically remarked. “At least there’s a good chance nobody else knows this script, right?”

“Indeed. It hath most likely been forgotten by all but me and mine fellow sisters.”

“Interesting. Then could you perhaps teach me the language later?”

When Ambrosia heard that, she beamed so wide that it made her look several millennia younger.

“It would be mine utmost pleasure, milord!” she agreed enthusiastically.

“Alright, I’ll look forward to it.”

Boxxy went on its way, leaving the dryad to enjoy her moment of excitement. Her enthusiasm was probably a good sign, as the shapeshifter genuinely intended to master that script. It didn’t wish to do so because of any academic interest, of course. While the ex-mimic was a curious creature, that did not mean it was fond of studying… unless it considered the subject to be tasty, shiny, or otherwise necessary. And this language had the potential to be very shiny indeed, because upon closer inspection, Boxxy managed to recognize several of the symbols on that wall.

The letters were almost identical to the sigils used in demonic rituals. The differences were so minor, that they could easily be attributed to a difference in handwriting. Combined with the long, incomprehensible chants it knew from the Demonology Skill, it was fairly obvious that demons had their own secret language. An ancient tongue of power that might hold the power to influence the world around it in some unique way.

The Summon Familiar Skill was a perfect example of that power in action. While the physical manifestation of a being from another realm was impressive, the ten-second-long and needlessly flashy activation process that preceded was even more incredible. The concentric rings of light that surrounded the Skill’s user while the summoning was in progress were actually made up of countless tiny symbols. Ones that were in a constant state of flux and rapidly changed shape and size as the Skill progressed, almost as if they were busy re-writing the fabric of reality itself.

While Boxxy’s Mana Locator Gland made it possible to perceive such things with relative ease, most enlightened Warlocks would probably only see them as concentric circles of solid light. That didn’t mean that the shapeshifter was the first to notice that language’s existence, however. Pretty much every adventurer and scholar that dabbled in demonic magic and lore sooner or later realized it. However, no matter how much research

was done over the years, the academic community's attempts at deciphering the language were largely futile.

This was mostly due to a lack in reference materials. The incomplete and superficial knowledge granted by relevant Skills was the only real source of information on the subject, and it was quite insufficient. Knowing how to write the letters didn't mean one could read them aloud, and there was a huge difference between being able to speak the words and comprehending their connotations. While the meaning of certain words or phrases could be gleaned from context, the language as a whole remained a mystery.

There was also the fact that all demons capable of speech knew the languages of mortals, and the Skills in question provided all the necessary information to invoke the related magic. There was therefore no practical purpose in researching the language. So, while there were most certainly a few zealous people bashing their heads at it, the study of the demonic script had been largely abandoned as a lost cause. Just another of the world's great mysteries.

This was where Boxxy's situation was different. An enormous sample of the enigmatic language lay carved into the wall of its dungeon, literally in front of its very eyes. It was certain the 'ancient script' Ambrosia spoke of and the language used in demonic rituals were one and the same. As for how the dryad knew of it, the cause was most likely the common trait she shared with demonkind in general—both were existences created by gods.

Granted, the deities that birthed them and the circumstances under which it happened were completely different, but that common trait seemed to be the most likely suspect. It wasn't a stretch of the imagination to say that the language was not demonic, but divine in origin. And since there was no Taboo in place that forbade a mortal from gaining such exotic, potentially dangerous knowledge, Boxxy would not hesitate to learn the meaning behind those squiggly letters and weird pronunciations.

It was highly unlikely it could bend reality just by speaking a few words, of course. The dryad would have doubtlessly used that power against the termites if it were that easy. However, Boxxy had a hunch that there was still a chance for this language to have some kind of reality-warping properties. The shapeshifter had developed a metaphorical nose for shiny

things, and this language reeked of it. Even if the creature's assumptions were later proven wrong and these letters didn't have such power, it could still profit off of the knowledge by selling it to the highest bidder. Not only that, but understanding the contents of Demonology-derived rituals would surely help it avoid more nasty surprises like that Unholy Wealth incident.

Heretical goblets aside, that mystical lightning bolt had scared the shapeshifter to splinters.

Over the coming days, however, Boxxy found out that learning a language from scratch was no easy task. Since all of its familiars communicated primarily with Atican, it had been able to almost automatically learn to speak the language. Getting the hang of the writing and reading hadn't been too difficult, either. However, the tentatively named Divine language was an extremely formidable opponent.

To begin with, it apparently had a mind-boggling two hundred and fifty-five letters—ten times more than Atican. Many of them had multiple syllables and read like short words in and of themselves. Letters such as 'ubuth,' 'rakar' or 'fus' were examples of this. At least Boxxy was able to confirm that Ambrosia's language and the words it spoke during rituals were the same. It also found out that Snack's full name, which was listed as 'Xerababadubuth L'okrelaila' by the Status screen, could be spelled out in only nine Divine letters. If this was the standard, then it suddenly made sense why demons always seemed to have such long, nonsensical-sounding names.

The succubus herself had no idea about any of that. While she could speak several languages thanks to Versatile Tongue—a Skill derived from her Succubus Job—neither Divine nor Demonic were among them. The ability had the potential to let her use exotic languages such as Draconic and Cogton, whatever *that* was, once it got to a high enough Level, but that was beside the point. Not just Snack, but all three of Boxxy's familiars were completely unaware of the meaning or origin behind their names. Apparently, such things were assigned at random, so the Divine spelling involved in them was likely Joseph's doing.

Incidentally, of the shapeshifter's other familiars, 'Koralenteprix Khusuuszun Caonthioxxaa' was ten letters long and 'Dreaheath Uniolphial

Maramakartor' was eleven. Other demonic names Boxxy was familiar with were Carl's 'Katorolomaongott' and Punchy's 'Nagnamor,' which were respectively six and two letters long. It also seemed impossible to actually spell Boxxy's full name in Divine, as the closest Ambrosia could come up with was 'Bo-kusi Tu-rapp Mo-rin-ge-wud.' Three words that, oddly enough, could be loosely translated to mean 'rosebud frozen peas.'

Such trivialities aside, it was obvious that learning this language would take a very, very long time. It would be a difficult feat, despite Boxxy's INT and WIS Attributes greatly boosting its natural mental capabilities as a doppelganger. Still, the shapeshifter found out it could work on learning the language while pretending to sleep at night through the dungeon-assisted communications with Ambrosia. The core couldn't properly convey the Divine letters themselves so it was a bit tricky, but definitely not impossible. More importantly, these lessons gave the shapeshifter something else to do at night.

Anything was better than practicing that infuriating Meditation Skill at this point. As expected, trying to Level a Skill that relied on inner peace and pure thoughts was too high of a hurdle for a murderous, violent creature brimming with worldly desires. The fact it got it all the way up to Level 4 was praiseworthy in and of itself, and even that much was mostly due to Boxxy's patience and stubbornness.

However, that Level was more or less its limit. The monster seemed unable to build any additional proficiency, no matter how much it tried. Much like Shapeshift, it was not a Skill that could be mastered through simple repetition and hard work, so Boxxy had to be satisfied with an overall 40% boost to its automatic MP recovery rate. It was not an insignificant result, as the monster's MP was very much its lifeline, especially during prolonged battles where Meditation's effects would shine. It would've liked to advance the ability further, but it accepted that the task seemed impossible. Rather than dwell on things it couldn't change, the shapeshifter instead focused on improving the things it could.

Boxxy slipped back into its new-yet-unchanged routine. It continued acting the part of Keira, had Ranger training for most of the day. Afterwards it wandered around town looking for information and prey during the

afternoon and evenings before returning to Rowana's house at night. There, it played a bit with Minic, spent some 'quality time' with the elf, and then went to bed. Since it only needed to sleep once every two or three days, it spent most nights either studying with Ambrosia or playing around in the dungeon.

Xera and Kora were left mostly idle during this time. Since the termites plaguing Ambrosia's tree had been completely exterminated, they had very little to do unless their Master called upon them. It went without saying that they spent much of that time performing all manner of lewd acts, sometimes involving the obedient dryad behind Boxxy's back.

As for Drea, she kept herself occupied by stalking her master during the day and producing silk at night. She had to be extra careful around that Faehorn fellow, though. That elf was really sharp, and seemed to notice her presence at times, despite there being over a hundred meters between them. A high-Level Ranger's senses and intuition were not to be trifled with, so the fact the stalker hadn't been found out completely spoke volumes to her sneaking ability. Still, Boxxy eventually warned Claws to give that old guy an even wider berth, as he was bound to grow suspicious if he kept noticing *something*, even if he didn't know what it was.

Fizzy divided most of her time between fighting in the arena for money and working on her Silk-Weaver machine. She had a prototype ready within a week of starting the project, and although successfully it produced Demon Silk from the raw thread, it had a myriad of issues. It worked slow, was too small in scale and the quality of the silk was quite poor. The stalker demon also objected to the design. Being forced to squat down and 'poop out' silk directly into an opening on the side of the machine was too high a hurdle for her, especially since Boxxy was there to watch the trial run. The upside was that the golem obtained a lot of useful data from that particular experiment, so she was certain she'd make a better one eventually with the shapeshifter's assistance.

That had been more or less how the group of monsters and demons spent the two weeks following the 'silk hole' incident. During that time, Boxxy had been able to steadily increase all of its Job Levels. The Doppelganger Job got all the way up to Level to 21, giving it access to two new Skills.

The first was Broken Reflection, which allowed it to consume a humanoid corpse and become a perfect copy of it. This included replicating any clothing or gear it happened to be wearing at the time. This was ultimately an illusion born of flesh, so any armor or weapons created through this Skill were for purely decorative purposes and would disappear after an hour or so. The ability's most powerful effect, and the one Boxxy actually cared about, was that it would also absorb the victim's most recent memories like a post-mortem form of mind-reading.

The second Doppelganger Skill was called Puppet Parasite. Using it involved implanting a piece of Boxxy's flesh into the base of a living target's skull. If successful, the monster could gain full control over the victim's movements for a short time. Their minds would be unaffected, meaning the subjects would essentially become prisoners inside their own bodies. Although Boxxy's insidious mind thought of many ways it could torture its captives through this method, leaving their minds conscious was ultimately a drawback. Not only did it leave their memories of the act intact, but it also gave them a chance to fight the Puppet Parasite's influence. Indeed, someone with a high enough END and/or MNT Attribute could completely resist the Skill's effects. It was still possible to dominate more powerful targets, but only once they had been sufficiently weakened through blood loss and major physical trauma.

The Warlock Job had also steadily progressed to Level 40, mostly due to its familiars keeping themselves busy by squashing small fry. It wasn't much of a power boost, but it was just enough to allow Boxxy to learn a Skill called Despair Aura. This was essentially the all-purpose, super-powered version of Butcher of Humanity, as activating this Skill caused the Warlock to practically radiate dread and malice. Hardier individuals would likely be able to shrug off this oppressive aura, but most would find themselves overcome with fear and panic. Unlike the Perk, however, this one could be toggled on and off, making it an excellent tool for what was to come.

And what that was had steadily become clear over the last ten days. Faehorn and the other elderly instructors at the Consortium had increased the intensity and frequency of their lessons, focusing more on longer, tougher expeditions with mixed groups of students. It was essentially a

form of power leveling, as everyone, Keira included, reached Level 25 of their respective adventurer Job quite rapidly. Every student had slowly but surely come to understand the reasons behind this sudden spike in activity on behalf the teachers, so they were all prepared the dire news finally arrived.

The Lodrak Empire had officially declared war on the Ishigar Republic.

Their justification was that the Republic refused to cooperate in tracking down the completely fabricated ‘terrorists’ that caused the Calamity of Monotal. The elven Exarch—the temporarily-elected commander-in-chief—had fervently denied such accusations, stating his cabinet had absolutely nothing to do with that horrific event. Although he wanted to avoid war at all costs, there was no way he would accept the Empire’s demands of allowing their soldiers to march unhindered through the Republic’s territories. This was, unsurprisingly, exactly what the warmongering Imperials had been counting on, as evidenced by how they gradually prepared and escalated their armed forces over the past few months. Although the Republic’s military had done the same, their troops were clearly inferior in both quantity and quality.

This was where Keira and her fellow students came in. The elven government was forced to conscript adventurers into its armed forces, something that was only seen as natural since the country backed pretty much all adventurer guilds based in the Republic. Much to Boxxy’s surprise, every single member of the Consortium, trainee and veteran alike, gladly took up arms to protect their homeland. The shapeshifter knew the people of Azurvale had a strong sense of community and patriotism, but the pragmatic monster expected at least some of them to run away from the war. Such people did exist of course, but none could be found among the members of the eight guilds within the Central Consortium.

Of course, it wasn’t just the elves. Many dwarves, gnomes and, even humans all threw their lot in with the Republic. The Empire’s widespread disdain for elvenkind was no secret, so they were convinced that this would not be a peaceful occupation if they just sat by and let it happen. To them, this conflict had nothing to do with race. For some, it was about standing up for what they believed in. For others, it was about fighting to protect their

loved ones and the lives they'd built here. Others still were simply glory seekers that sought to make names for themselves on the fields of war.

Each one of Boxxy's minions was also uniquely motivated in their own way. Whether it was to spread violence and chaos, satiate their desires or show off in a flashy manner, all of them had one thing in common—they would make themselves useful to the monster that had brought them together. Well, except for Ambrosia. The dryad was physically unable to venture too far from her tree, so Boxxy didn't even bother asking her to join. It wasn't as if she understood the first thing about warfare or large-scale conflict anyway, though she could probably be useful in some other capacity.

Overall, while every enlightened soldier or conscript had their own motivations, none of them could match the sheer enthusiasm of a certain box-minded catgirl. Although one couldn't tell from Keira's face, the monster hiding behind it was positively giddy at the prospect of open warfare against humanity. Its goals and objectives had nothing to do with politics, beliefs, honor, or discrimination. What were those things, anyway? Were they tasty? They didn't seem tasty.

But humans most definitely *were* tasty, and Boxxy was salivated at the thought of the feast that was to come. This conflict was the perfect opportunity to slaughter them by the hundreds and then feast on their bodies. It would bite, stab, cut and maul them to death. It would come at them without mercy or hesitation, striking at them with no warning and for no real reason other than because it *wanted* to.

Just like any real monster would.

Interlude
Long-Distance Relationship

Rowana and Keira were having dinner together as per usual. However, the normally noisy table was gripped by a heavy silence. Only the clatter of silverware and the odd chewing and gulping noises could be heard throughout the house. The elf had expected something like this to happen, but there was only so much she could take.

“So… tomorrow’s the big day?” she asked, not even trying to hide the worry in her voice.

“Yeah, it is,” Keira replied flatly.

The elf couldn’t bear to see her normally energetic girlfriend so lifeless and subdued. Even if the catgirl’s lips curled in a faint smile, the distant look in her eyes proved it wasn’t genuine. It was obvious the beastkin was trying to keep her feelings in check, and was failing miserably. She seemed to be the kind of person whose thoughts floated onto her face without her noticing, so Keira’s attempts at masking her nervousness fell flat. Yet, Rowana hesitated to call her out on it, because she wasn’t sure which one of them Keira wanted to reassure with that flimsy front of hers.

“You don’t… You don’t *have* to go, you know,” the elf added after a few minutes. “I know that conscription is mandatory, but there are exceptions…”

Keira stopped raising the spoonful of stew towards her mouth, and slowly lowered it back into her bowl. She moved her gaze away from her meal, looked directly into the elf’s eyes and spoke with a level voice.

“You’re wrong,” she disagreed.

“No, I’m sure of it. I’m certain there was a clause in it about immigrants and-”

“Rowie,” she interrupted, “not that. I know I can get out of it somehow, maybe make a run for it. But I won’t. I *want* to go.”

“But why?! Why do you have to go off and join a war so suddenly!”

“Because I already… I don’t want anyone else to suffer at the hands of people who think that might makes right.”

The elf fell silent as the redhead stared off into distance, peering beyond the walls of the cozy little hovel.

“My parents… They were hunters. Good ones, you know. They often brought back more meat and fur than they could use, so they usually traded it for other goods at the village market. They always made sure to get fresh salmon whenever possible.”

Keira’s face softened into a nostalgic smile, the first genuine sign of joy she’d shown all evening.

“My mom, she’d steam it especially for me, since I didn’t like it grilled or in a stew like she and dad did. We didn’t have much, but they spoiled me every chance they got.”

The catgirl turned to face Rowana, who listened intently.

“They hunted a lot at night. Said the best game came out after sunset. They weren’t adventurers or anything like that, but they still handled themselves okay. Those two would be fine even in that pitch blackness… It’s something I believed with all my might.”

Keira’s face turned scornful.

“What… what happened?” Rowana asked warily.

“Imperial patrol killed my parents, that’s what happened!” she yelled. “Said they mistook them for bandits out in the woods! Claimed the two of them came at them in the middle of the night and tried to ambush them, so they fought back and killed them in self-defense! Fucking lying bastards! My parents would never do something like that!”

She shook with rage the likes of which Rowana had never seen from the redhead before, and that scared the elf something fierce.

“Those *monsters* attacked them on purpose! I don’t know why, but I’m certain of it! I saw the bastards’ faces! They didn’t show even the tiniest bit of remorse! Then I saw, I saw what they’d done to my mom! They- they- they- they-”

Rowana left her seat and went to hug the hyperventilating Keira. She held her tight against her chest, stroked her hair and tried to soothe her as best she could. The beastkin broke out into full-blown sobbing, as her bottled-up sorrows overflowed like water from a burst dam. The elf accepted it all, waiting patiently for the troubled girl to let it all flow out. She didn't know what to think, other than she had to be here for her.

It took several minutes for Keira to calm down before resuming her tale.

"I couldn't- **Sniffle** I couldn't do anything about it. None of the other villagers cared and those soldiers denied everything. They just did whatever they pleased, simply because they had the uniform and the victims weren't 'one of them.' They're the absolute fucking worst kind of scum."

She rubbed the tears from her face.

"I've… Those people, they'll do unspeakable things if we don't stop them, Rowie. I know I haven't been here long, but this place is my home. *Our* home. I couldn't do anything when my family was taken from me, but I have the power to protect people now, Rowie! I don't want anyone else suffer like I have. I don't want... I don't want to run anymore."

The elf realized how selfish she had been, as she gently rubbed the upset Keira's back. The upset beastkin was right. This unjust war was something bigger than them, yet all she could think about was how she didn't want her girlfriend to disappear. It was a perfectly natural reaction and an entirely justified concern, but her lover's survival was far from Rowana's only worry.

"You'll… have to kill people, Keira."

"I know."

"That could change you forever, even if you live through that."

"… I know."

A few more silent minutes passed while the couple held onto each other, as if bracing for a storm.

"I won't stop you, but… You have to promise me something. You come back to me, you hear? I don't care if we win or lose this, but you come back

to me safe and sound."

"That- That's obviously a given!" the redhead forcefully perked up. "Just you watch, those Imperial shitheads won't know what hit 'em!" the redhead declared confidently.

"Hehe, my shy little Keira has become quite reliable lately, hasn't she?"

"Hey! I'm always reliable! I'm a full-fledged professional adventurer now!"

"Then care to explain why I got a bill from a certain innkeeper for roof repairs a few days ago, Miss Full-Fledged-Professional-Adventurer?"

"… This and that are unrelated."

The two shared another light chuckle, as the heavy atmosphere from a while ago steadily dispersed.

"You know, sweetie… I have a bit of a selfish request."

The beastkin and her fellow freshly graduated trainees were being deployed to the front lines tomorrow morning. The elf was fully aware of the grim reality that, even though they had barely just met, this was likely to be the last night the couple spent together. Her sweetheart was going off to fulfil her duty, putting her life on the line for her beliefs. Rowana had neither the right nor the authority to stop her. However, as Keira's girlfriend, she had a duty of her own—to make this evening as special as possible and send the brave beastkin off with a smile.

"Would you go on a little late-night stroll with me?"

"Of course, Rowie. Anything for you."

The two of them got dressed and exited the small house. The elf led the catgirl up the walkway to the overhead street-sized branch, which was more or less deserted at this time of night. Rather than stopping there, she continued climbing upwards, much to Keira's surprise. There were a few sparse, cheap houses like Rowana's further up. There were no heavily populated areas beyond that point, or at least not ones that were accessible on foot. In essence, this area was the de-facto outskirts of Azurvale, yet the pair kept steadily climbing until they reached the absolute highest point of that long and winding staircase.

They arrived at an old, wooden platform built into the side of the trunk. It was likely intended to hold a large treehouse, but had been abandoned for one reason or another. Rowana reached into her large bag and took out a few blankets. She draped them onto the wooden planks and lied down on her back, motioning for Keira to join her.

“I used to come up here whenever I was feeling down,” the elf mused, gazing skyward. “This view was one of the few things that could really soothe my soul. Heh, I haven’t really needed to visit here ever since I met you, though!”

Above them was a peculiar gap in the hylt tree’s canopy that allowed a clear, unobstructed view of the heavens. It was a curious sight, almost as if someone had opened a small window into the cosmos. The distant stars twinkled as they always did, their weak light contrasted by the surrounding wall of blackness. It was like they were glittering gems at the bottom of a treasure chest.

“So shiny…” Keira muttered.

“Yes… it is…”

Rowana wasn’t looking at the sky, but at the sparkly-eyed redhead. The elf was enraptured at the sight of the faint streaks of moonlight that punched through the dense foliage to illuminate the catgirl’s face. Her yellow eyes shone like jewels, her crimson hair shone like the embers of a dying flame, and that smooth, tanned skin glistened like polished bronze. She gently caressed Keira’s cheek with the back of her hand, prompting the beastkin to lock eyes with her. Their faces naturally drew closer, as Rowana focused solely on Keira’s thin, moist lips. A soft, quick kiss rapidly developed into a passionate frenzy. They embraced, feeling each other’s warmth and quickly, almost unthinkingly disposed of their bothersome clothes. They brazenly and unabashedly began making love in the open, lonely space where anyone could see them.

The thing was, there was actually someone watching the two women. Someone that had been actively following them the entire evening. This individual had spied on the couple’s emotionally-charged dinner by peeking through one of Rowana’s windows, and had then followed them silently up

those stairs. The peeper was presently breathing heavily while watching the couple make love under the stars. This voyeur had, as one might imagine, done all this without either of the couple's knowledge or consent. Well, at least not *officially*.

Drea might have been a stalker in every sense of the word, but this had actually been part of her assignment. She was merely complying with her orders to keep an eye on her master and protect its cover from the shadows. It wasn't that she *wanted* to see the two lovebirds' affection… but she certainly didn't complain about it either.

Mostly because Drea had completely immersed herself in the illusion her shapeshifting master projected. Though she was technically fulfilling her orders to watch over the doppelganger, she was approaching it not as a vigilant sentry, but as a kid watching an elaborate stage play. Okay, perhaps not *exactly* like that. The things currently taking place on that platform beneath her were most definitely not suitable for children. One could argue that Keira had absolutely no place in such a 'production,' but her Status stated she was over fifteen years old, which classified her as an adult in the eyes of the law.

That said, the couple were still at risk of being arrested for indecent exposure. Emphasis on 'indecent.' The elf was clearly an experienced lover of women, and she seemed to be going all out tonight. Drea had, of course, seen this sort of stuff before multiple times on the Boxxy Show, but never as intense and certainly not in person. The way the couple's moans echoed slightly around her while their sweaty bodies glistened in the sparse moonlight was a whole new experience. There was also the smell, as a light evening breeze wafted over a faint scent of sex mixed with a certain shapeshifter's aphrodisiac-laced pheromones.

Drea felt her body flush with an unfamiliar sensation. Her breathing was hot and heavy, and her brow dampened with sweat. The stalker couldn't stop squirming atop the sizable branch she'd been perched on. It took her a short while, but she eventually deduced that, for the first time in her eight hundred years of living, she was aroused. This revelation surprised her greatly, as Drea's kind had never engaged in promiscuous activity. The thought hadn't even crossed her mind. However, these were rather unique

circumstances, and the spider-girl had more important things to worry about than the overwhelming unlikelihood of a stalker discovering their libido.

Indeed, the thing at the front of Drea's mind was how to make the most of this situation. Pleasuring herself while spying on the lascivious couple seemed like a good way to go about it. She knew how to do it, too. Drea might not have been interested in such things until just now, but she had still seen women pleasure themselves in various ways over the centuries. There were, however, certain… 'logistical problems' with that course of action. The sensitive spot that would normally be found between the legs of a female enlightened was absent from the physical form of a stalker demon.

Thankfully there was more than one way to skin a stalker, so to speak. Though Drea lacked that particular womanly feature, she still had two telltale lumps of flesh on her chest. So, she webbed up her own claws to prevent cutting herself and started fondling her own breasts by mimicking what Rowana did to Keira's. That seemed to elicit the sort of affirmative response she expected, which prompted her to take it a step further. On a hunch, she slowly peeled off the hard carapace keeping her bust from bouncing all over the place, ignoring the stinging pain involved.

This seemed to do the trick, as once the discomfort subsided, she had a hard time stopping herself from massaging her breasts. It was a wholly unfamiliar sensation, which made it akin to a delicacy to a being as ancient as Drea. She clumsily and thirstily edged herself closer until, with an especially loud hiss, the stalker achieved her first climax. Her body spasmed and contorted as she rode it out until the end, caring little for the way her hands were involuntarily discharging webbing all over her upper body.

As she calmed down, however, Drea suddenly remembered her position. Though she never stopped watching Boxxy while experimenting with herself, she was now aware of just how stupid she had behaved. Just because her standing orders for the evening were a bit lax didn't mean she could shirk her duties. Thankfully the couple below her carried on, seemingly blind and deaf to the world around them.

With post-climax clarity setting in, Drea grew increasingly embarrassed at her own actions. How could she have acted in such a shameful way? And in

a place where anyone could have seen her? What would've happened if her master witnessed her playing with herself? The shapeshifter had previously praised her for the professional and efficient manner in which she carried out her duties. There was no doubt in her mind her master would've been disappointed in her if it ever found out.

"Claws."

She was therefore rather glad she didn't actually have a heart, as she was certain it would've leapt out of her mouth when her master contacted telepathically her mere moments later.

It's okay, calm down, she reassured herself. *Maybe Boxxy just wants to talk about something else. Yeah, that's probably it.*

"Yes, Master?" she responded through the link.

"Do you see something out of the usual up there?"

Drea quickly scanned her surroundings, her compound eyes easily piercing the darkness.

"I don't think so, Master. As far as I can tell, there's nobody around but me, you, and the elf. Should I be looking for something specific?"

"I see."

"Why do you ask?" she inquired. "Do you suspect you might be attacked?"

"No, not quite. You know what my Agent of Chaos Skill does, right?"

"Only what you've told me."

Namely that it activated randomly and made weird stuff happen. This wasn't the most exhaustive of explanations, but it was the best Boxxy could manage considering it had only seen the ability in action a few times.

"Well, here's the thing. It went off when I got up here."

Oh no, a sense of dread washed over Drea.

"Then it suddenly said that it was done about a minute ago."

Please, no!

“At first, I thought it had something to do with the elf, but she’s not showing any abnormal behavior.”

Anything but that!

“I guess all it did was help you discover masturbation.”

NOOOOO!

“Try and be more discrete in the future, by the way,” it added casually. “I could hear you going at it from down here.”

“… Yes, Master,” she sheepishly replied.

I just wanna die, Drea whimpered internally. *How could this night get any worse?*

The answer to that question would be revealed to her the next time she returned to the Beyond. It would be at that point that she would discover that the God of Happenstance had, in his infinite wisdom, made the female stalker’s exploration of her newfound sexuality the main feature of that evening’s episode of the Boxxy Show.

In fact, the recording of Drea passionately groping her exposed breasts while two beautiful women ravished each other in the background would be a popular highlight for centuries to come.

Chapter Four
First Blood

Part One

A small party of four made their way through the wilderness. They walked through a valley, surrounded on all sides by tall hills that needed just a little more height to graduate to being mini-mountains. Numerous thickets of pine trees were strewn about, although far too disconnected to be called an actual forest. Green grass wet with dew covered the entire region as far as the eye could see, and the morning sun began to light up the sky. Overall, the terrain had barely enough cover to allow the small team of four people to move without being noticed from afar. Well, strictly speaking two of them weren't really 'people,' even though they looked the part.

Keira was far ahead of the group, wearing her standard-issue chainmail-and-leather armor, along with the dark-green tunic that marked her as a member of the Hidden Arrow guild. She was the group's designated spotter and scout, so she walked about sixty to seventy meters ahead. Far enough to warn the others of danger using Whisper Wind, but close enough to fall back should the need arise.

The other three moved in a tight formation, almost shoulder to shoulder. At the head stood the two-meter tall, woman-shaped battering ram known as Lola. She wore a brand-new set of dwarven-forged, half-plate armor of Superior quality—a 'loan' from her doting Warrior trainer. Blue-tinted metal plates protected her torso, shoulders, forearms and the front of her legs and thighs. A light-metal helmet perfectly concealed her short, black hair, but she had its visor up to leave her face wide open.

Although lacking the protection of full plate, this armor gave the wearer a bit more freedom of movement and made significantly less noise. It reduced the effects of any hostile magic aimed at its wearer purely because it was forged out of a steel-based alloy called azurite. Each piece of it was also enchanted to make it both lighter and tougher, making it the sort of equipment any first-rate adventurer would be proud to have.

A male elf called Jules trailed behind Lola. Although of average height for his race, sex, and age, the towering woman made him appear especially short by comparison. He also looked much older than he actually was

because of the dull gray color of his short, scruffy beard and messy, unkempt hair. His face looked perpetually tired and somewhat pale, which made it even harder to believe he was barely out of his twenties.

A dark brown traveling cloak covered most of his body. It swished around him as he moved, revealing the pale-gray leather armor he wore underneath, as well as the small, shoulder-slung bag that rattled quietly with each step. Although not visible under the soft gloves he wore, he had four magic rings that provided various minor effects. He walked along while carrying an ash-colored wooden staff with an engraved mithril sphere as its head. His choice of weapon made it clear he was a type of magic user, although his actual Job was made obvious by the fourth member of the group.

Floating idly at the rear of the group with a thoroughly bored look on her gorgeous face was a succubus. She had white skin like alabaster and glowing yellow eyes. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was parted by a pair of pitch-black, ram-like horns sticking out of the sides of her forehead. As for her body, it was as outrageously proportioned and scandalously clothed as one might expect of her kind, but the wings on her back marked her as rather unique. For they were not leathery or bat-like in appearance, but covered in bright-yellow feathers that made them appear more angelic than demonic.

She was nevertheless unquestionably a resident of the Beyond—an ivory succubus that bore the name Purupururin. Her subspecies was unique in its aptitude for holy magic, and almost all of them were Priests of the God of Dice Rolls. How devout these ladies actually were varied from one to the next, but they were all capable of weaving healing and defensive Spells with ease. These succubi also possessed a special racial Skill called Demonic Invigoration, which allowed their healing Spells to restore a small amount of MP in addition to their regular effects. The ability also ‘invigorated’ a very specific part of the male anatomy, but that was hardly what Jules was after when he contracted Purupururin.

As for the reason why a Ranger, a Warrior, and a Warlock were out here in the wilderness, it was sadly not the set up for a bad joke. The war between the Lodrak Empire and the Ishigar Republic was about to go into full swing, and Keira, Lola, and Jules were one of many recon teams dispatched to

scout enemy positions, numbers, and the lay of the land. One could argue that a Ranger would cover more ground by themselves, but that was only the case if the region wasn't teeming with monsters.

"Enemy contact, standby."

Lola motioned the other two to stop when she heard Keira's voice drift gently into her ear via Whisper Wind. The elf couldn't respond since it was a one-way communication channel, but it was a lot better than not having it.

"I see a group of five gnolls, one-hundred-and-thirty meters ahead. They haven't spotted me."

That was why traversing this region alone was a bad idea. Gnolls were humanoid monsters with predominantly canine features, giving them the appearance of bipedal hyenas. Although not particularly strong on their own, they were intelligent enough to wield weapons, wear armor, and understand pack tactics. They were also known for building crude villages and even showed a vested interest in agriculture and animal husbandry, putting them a step above other tribal monsters like goblins and kobolds. Overall, gnolls were relatively docile as far as monsters went. They seemed content to eke out a primitive existence without actively assaulting enlightened settlements, but would show no mercy to any invaders within their territory.

Which, incidentally, was precisely what Keira's group was technically doing.

"We should be able to take them easy, move up to my position," the Ranger reported.

"Keira found some more gnolls," Lola informed Jules. "Says they're easy pickings, so we're going to move on them."

"She says that about everything," the Warlock grumbled.

"She hasn't been wrong so far."

"No, I guess not."

A Ranger's primary duties outside of combat situations involved navigating the wilderness and accurately assessing potential threats. It allowed groups

of adventurers to pick their fights, which could lead to disaster if the scout wasn't up to snuff. Jules had to admit, that cat-eared rookie was pretty damn good at her job. That wasn't to say he didn't have reservations, though.

"I just get the feeling she's getting overconfident," he added. "Those gnolls would rip her to shreds if they caught her scent."

The ivory succubus behind him gave off a snort at the thought of a few bipedal puppies being able to defeat *that*.

"… Something you wanna say, Purupururin?" Jules asked.

"Yeah. You guys are fucking idiots."

"Charming as usual, aren't you?"

Of course, even if she was aware of Boxxy's secret, she wouldn't dare reveal it for three very good reasons. First of all, it would ruin the fun. Second of all, the Progenitor she worshipped would probably have her sorry ass on a platter, if she dared to do that. Steven despised spoilers worst of all, and none of his 'children' wanted to risk earning his wrath or disappointment by spilling the beans. Last, but certainly not least, that shapeshifter was her ticket to freedom. She hoped to work out some deal with 'Keira' to make Jules disappear and allow his familiar to run free, but Purupururin hadn't had the chance to even speak with it yet.

"Right, go back to keeping your face-hole shut and stay quiet."

Unfortunately for her, said master knew how to handle a succubus. Jules kept a near-permanent gag order on her ever since they were contracted years ago. Language was one of a succubus's main weapons, after all, and the scenario she planned to enact was just the type of thing her master wanted to avoid.

The trio climbed up the hillside, following Keira's footsteps until they met up with their scout. The catgirl pointed in the distance, indicating a group of shadows moving between the trees. Lola nodded knowingly and unsheathed the longsword from her hip while readjusting her left hand's grip on her kite shield. She took point as the group crept closer. Once they were about fifty meters from the gnolls, she looked over her shoulder to confirm the others

were ready, then nodded at Keira. The beastkin nocked an arrow on her iron-reinforced hunting bow and took aim. She picked out the juiciest-looking target and let loose while activating a Martial Art with a murmur.

“Power Shot.”

The arrow left a trail of red light as it flew forward. It nailed the tallest gnoll right between the eyes, nearly taking its head clean off. The other four canine creatures turned towards the source of the attack and let out growls and howls as they ran for cover. Even if it had strong penetrative force, the trajectory of a Power Shot was far too easy to track, so that was likely going to be the only clean shot the Ranger would get.

Lola sprang forward from the undergrowth she was hiding in and dashed to intercept the rest of the gnolls. By the time she caught up to them, Keira had nailed another while Jules’ Shadowbolt and Ebonfire finished off a third. The female elf slammed into the fourth gnoll with her shield, knocking it on its back. She pinned the monster to the ground with her foot and repeatedly stabbed downwards with her sword until it stopped moving. The Warrior then sprinted after the last one, which attempted to flee through the foliage on all fours. She caught up to it in a display of exceptional athleticism and finished it off before it could get help, though it still put up a fight.

Overall, it had taken barely thirty seconds to wipe out the gnoll hunting party. An easy win, just as Keira said. Would’ve been a flawless victory if Lola hadn’t taken a few hits. The gnoll she knocked over managed to club her in the abdomen before she could finish it off, and the one she chased after had bitten her a few times. The Warrior’s armor absorbed most of the punishment, but she was still left with a bruise and some minor scratches. Jules had Purupururin immediately treat those. Gnolls were known to carry diseases both magical and mundane, some of which could easily overcome a Warrior’s hardy constitution.

The group rebuilt their earlier formation and kept climbing the hill. They ran into a smaller group of gnolls that were also easily dispatched before they reached the top, at which point all of them could clearly see their objective.

A large force of Imperial soldiers had made camp along the road in the distance, over a kilometer away from their current position. The smoke trails rising from the sea of white tents signified some of them were already up and about, likely preparing breakfast. A large number of griffin-adorned blue flags and banners were strung up, signifying the force's allegiance. Although they were not on Republic territory yet, they were within a half-day's march of the border.

Lola, Keira and Jules shared a few meaningful glances. The Ranger reached into her backpack. She pulled out a crystal cube that was about eight centimeters on each side, as well as an Artificer-made spyglass. She tapped three times on the Comm-crystal and whispered the password into it.

"Folly. Ulgred. Berry. Ankrow. Rillis. Gorgon. Geomer."

The cube sprang to life and projected the blue-colored transparent image of a male elf with short hair, a military uniform, and a stern expression.

"This is Keira Morgana, recon team Three-One," she reported.

"This is Forward Command, reading you loud and clear, Three-One," came the business-like response from the other end. "What's your situation?"

"We reached our destination and have eyes on the enemy force."

"Can you verify their numbers?"

The catgirl laid down on the ground, set the cube down next to her and looked over the large camp with her spyglass. She took an approximation of the number of tents, and took into account the average number of soldiers that would fit in a single one before she gave her estimate.

"Seems to be two regiments' worth, at least four thousand people, maybe five."

The officer stoically noted down the information, but Jules and Lola's expressions sunk when they heard that. This was twice the number of soldiers they were told to expect during their initial briefing.

"Understood, Three-One. Can you make out any heraldries?"

Each noble house of the Empire had a small armed force, which they were expected to train and maintain. While the Emperor's generals had ultimate

authority, each house was directly responsible for its own soldiers. As such, they made a point of displaying their respective colors alongside the Empire's flag whenever possible.

"Yes, sir, two of them," Keira reported. "One's a set of three white horses on a green background, seems these make up a quarter of the enemy force. The rest are under a black banner with a pair of golden crossed swords."

"Affirmative. Do you see anything special regarding their composition or equipment?"

"Just that they have a lot of horses. Maybe a thousand, can't get an accurate count. Big ones, too, and they're all under the first banner I mentioned. Seems to be a cavalry detachment. There's also a griffin flying towards the south, probably just took off."

"Do you see any siege equipment?"

"Not that I can tell. There's a bunch of supply carts strewn around the place, though."

"How can she tell so much from such a distance?" Jules whispered to Lola while Keira kept going on with her report.

"Because that's her job, Jules," she whispered back.

"Well, yeah, but it's so dark I can barely even make out the tents. I know her kind are supposed to have sharper eyes than us elves, but this seems a bit much."

Admittedly, Rangers had access to a Skill called Eagle Eye that helped them peer over long distances, but this girl's Level wasn't high enough to have access to it.

"Must be that spyglass thing," Lola pointed out. "She said she had the muffin lady make it especially for these recon missions."

"Muffin lady?" the Warlock raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, the Rustblood Juggernaut. You know, that mithril golem that's been working non-stop back at base?"

“Wait, she’s real? I thought she was just a rumor. I mean, why would a golem help a bunch of elves? And she can *make* things?”

“Look, it’s a long story. All you need to know is there’s a gnomish mind under all that metal, and that she’s Keira’s friend. She’s a member of the Consortium too, so she got drafted like the rest of us.”

“Hmm, well, if the guys in charge think she’s trustworthy, I guess I got no right to complain.”

That said, Jules would probably sing a different tune if he had actually seen Fizzy fight in the arena.

“Acknowledged, Three-One. That’ll be enough for now.”

Meanwhile, the group’s scout finished relaying what information she could through the Comm-crystal.

“Your orders,” the officer continued, “are to monitor the situation and send word the instant they start marching. You are then to continue to track and report on their progress. This is your main objective.”

“What about enemy contact, sir?”

“To be avoided at all costs. If discovered, you are to immediately retreat and fall back to base. The last thing we need is for you to be captured and interrogated by the enemy. Understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good. Forward Command out.”

The image of the elven officer disappeared, and Keira swiftly put away the cube and the spyglass. The team then made a basic camp while they waited for the enemy to start moving. They ate their field rations cold since building a campfire was out of the question. They also had to stay on alert the entire time, as it was unclear whether enemy scouts would show up. Realistically speaking, that was more a matter of ‘when’ rather than ‘if.’ That thought seemed to disturb Jules quite a bit. The Warlock alternated his gaze between the serious-faced Lola and the strangely smiling Keira for almost half an hour before he decided to speak his mind.

“Have you two… killed before? People, I mean.”

All of them had fought plenty of monsters, but taking the life of an enlightened person was a different matter entirely.

“We have, yeah,” Lola admitted. “Our teachers had us fight brigands and bandits. You know, to prepare us for the war.”

“Ah, I see… I’ve never actually hurt another person though.”

“Well, you better not hesitate,” the Warrior cautioned. “It could cost us all our lives if you choke when the time comes.”

“I know, I just- I’m not sure if I’ll forgive myself if I have to murder someone. I can’t justify that with war as an excuse, not to myself.”

Oh my fucking god! Purupururin yelled internally. *You’re a fucking Warlock, damn it! A wielder of ruinous powers that could melt a man’s face clean off! Start acting like it, already! Seriously, how are you this spineless?! Is it because you’re a virgin? I bet it’s because you’re a virgin, you pathetic loser!*

Needless to say, the succubus absolutely despised her master’s noble spirit, and those types of vitriolic comments were why she had lost her speaking rights.

“Just think of them as bugs,” Keira chimed in.

“Bugs?” Jules asked, confused.

“Yeah. They’re nothing but a bunch of big, four-legged cockroaches that should be crushed on sight, lest they eat all your food and lay eggs everywhere.”

“Heh.”

Lara gave a short, dry laugh. That description was too fitting of the Imperial army’s reputation.

“…”

Jules, on the other hand, was speechless. Hearing a sweet-looking child say such things with a calm voice was more than a little jarring, but this was the reality of their situation. The Warlock was one of the few elves that was truly hesitant to fight this war. Even if he knew the reasons and

circumstances, none of those would ease his guilt if he had to attack and kill another person. That was why he signed up for recon duty. Scouting teams typically saw little-to-no combat. Still, he wasn't green enough to think that surviving this conflict without shedding blood was possible.

The five-thousand strong force Keira and her group were monitoring started moving an hour after sunrise, and recon team Three-One sprang into action. They kept several kilometers ahead of the enemy, keeping Forward Command updated on the enemy's position as per their orders. The upper brass used that information to assess just how bad they'd lose. According to the intel they had managed to gather, the Imperial army had fielded an estimated one-hundred-twenty-thousand troops for this invasion. In terms of fighting strength, the average Imperial foot soldier was estimated to be around Level 35. More veteran troops went above Level 50, while the elites were Level 80 at the least. The Empire's numbers also included about twenty or so powerhouses that had reached Level 100 of their main Job and achieved a Rank Up. Unofficially referred to as Rankers and VIPs, these individuals had to be treated with utmost care and attention

The Republic, on the other hand, had barely ninety-thousand men and women, about half of whom consisted of conscripted adventurers. These people had a respectable advantage in terms of gear and Levels when compared to Imperial grunts, but they were not professional soldiers. Warfare demanded an entirely different set of training, equipment and experience than adventuring. As such, the Empire had the definite advantage when it came to both the quantity and quality of *soldiers* within their ranks. Not only that, but they had seasoned commanders that had already participated in military campaigns against the Sovereign States Alliance—an amalgamation of city states that lay far to the southeast, on the literal other side of the continent.

However, that experience only applied to open warfare. Republic High Command wanted to avoid large-scale conflicts, and planned on using hit-and-run tactics to disrupt and slow down the Empire's invasion. The elven homeland was lush with young and old forests that slowed down invaders and served as ambush spots, a sort of natural fortification. The Imperial army would have to either avoid these regions entirely or suffer heavy

losses trying to cross them. Either way, the Republic's goal of stalling the enemy would be fulfilled. They would buy time until the harsh winter set in and halted the Empire's advance until spring. The elves lacked an answer as to what they would do once spring came and the snow and ice melted, but they would cross that bridge when they got to it.

As for the Lodrak Empire, their goal was to occupy as much territory as possible before the snowfall set in. They would use the following months to fortify their position, such that it would be nigh-impossible for the weaker Republic to retake those lands once hostilities resumed. And hostilities would, in all likelihood, resume. Morale among the Imperial troops was high, as many of them looked to get payback for the Calamity of Monotal. Not only that, but they had also been led to believe the elves could repeat that devastating attack in the future if they weren't stopped.

Boxxy, much like every other Republic soldier, was aware of their motivations, which it found to be rather strange considering their religion. Humans, for the most part, worshipped Teresa, and while not quite at the level of a theocracy, her Church of the Hammer still had a lot of political influence within the Empire. Thanks to a certain loudmouthed God of Probability, Teresa already knew the truth behind the Monotal incident. It was entirely within her power to put a stop to this war, and yet she didn't.

Which, in essence, meant that the Goddess of Truth and Justice had allowed a war perpetuated on falsehoods to move forward unhindered. Even worse, her clergy were in full support of it. Boxxy failed to understand how and why someone that had the words 'Truth' and 'Justice' in her title would let this sort of thing happen. Then again, it vaguely recalled Charlie saying something or other about how the pantheon's members were caught up in some kind of internal power struggle over who had the most followers. Perhaps this was part of that. After all, elves worshipped Nyrie, so perhaps Teresa saw them as competition?

All things said and done, the shapeshifter didn't know nearly enough about the Gods to discern her motives, nor did it have the power to do anything about them. Therefore, it put that particular quandary into a corner of its mind and focused on the task at hand.

Keira’s recon team shadowed the Empire’s detachment for three more days and kept feeding relaying information about them to their higher ups. Jules was quite relieved, but also distinctly nervous that they had not come into contact with enemy scouts by now. His worries increased once Keira started reporting tracks of humans moving ahead of the main force, yet the group still hadn’t run into any of them directly.

This was no accident, as Boxxy and Drea had been discretely eliminating and devouring Imperial scouting parties without Keira’s teammates catching on. The shapeshifter’s goal was to have its public persona gain the trust of her peers and superiors, which required that she show good results and rack up military achievements. A flawless execution of her first mission seemed like the quickest way to achieve both of those conditions. This, in turn, meant that all Boxxy had to do was make sure that Keira’s team avoided enemy contact by preemptively eliminating said contacts.

Of course, this was hardly the ideal solution when it came to the Republic’s military goals. Imperial command did not fail to notice that several of their forward patrols disappeared in the woods without a trace. Given the circumstances, it was only natural to assume the humans would realize they were being harassed and monitored by the enemy.

And yet they still walked straight into Republic’s ambush four days after crossing the border.

Part Two

It was subtle, at first. The people responsible for Baron Hayhurst's cavalry detachment noticed the horses were uncharacteristically slow and lethargic. It had only been a few days since they'd crossed the Republic's border and although the hilly terrain was rough, their overall speed was slow enough to not cause this perplexing fatigue. Of course, one could always attribute the animals' lack of energy to the long trip they had to take in order to arrive at their staging area in the first place, but their handlers doubted it was something that simple. These were no common beasts of burden. These were the Empire's specially bred and trained warhorses, the fastest and toughest steeds on the entire damn continent.

With how barely noticeable this fatigue had been and how it hadn't slowed their progress, nobody addressed the issue until it was too late.

It happened while the Imperial expeditionary force made its way along a dirt road that snaked up the side of a steep hill. All nine hundred of their prized horses fell over foaming at the mouth, almost in unison. Some of the beasts fell over the side of the road and tumbled down the hill with their riders in tow, while others simply crushed the infantry under their massive weight. The march immediately ground to a halt, and the humans braced themselves for ambush. Though their training kept them from giving into panic, it was clear the suddenness of it all had shaken their courage.

Thanks to Keira's timely reports, the Republic had been able to accurately track the Imperials' movements, and had extrapolated their destination based on that. There were a number of high-value targets in the region, such as Fort Yimin or the city of Kulgara, but this particular group was ill-equipped to lay siege to either of those heavily fortified settlements. It was soon made clear their goal was to suppress and seize control of the surrounding area, known simply as the Clattering Plains. Doing so would cut off said fort and city from the rest of the Republic, and secure a route through which the Empire could move in with a bigger invasion force.

Having determined the enemy's objectives and the route they'd need to reach them, the Republic's Alchemists and scouts had laid a trap by

spreading a special toxin into the soil along the way. It rapidly seeped into the surrounding vegetation, and was transmitted to the horses that grazed on the now-poisonous grass and shrubs. Once the slow-acting toxin had thoroughly infected their bodies, the Republic aggravated it at a specific point in time by using wind magic to send an invisible, nearly odorless gas washing over the human force. Although it didn't do anything to the foot soldiers, it reacted with the mostly dormant poison within the horses' bodies and rapidly sped up its effects.

It was a roundabout way of doing things, but the plan had done its job of limiting the army's mobility without shedding a single drop of blood. While said horses could undoubtedly be saved if the Imperial medics treated them immediately, the Republic's strike force would not give them the chance. The elves made the Imperial army's march stop at this spot specifically because this was the ideal spot to unleash the second phase of their plan. One they had vigorously prepared for over the last two days.

The earth shook and groaned as a massive landslide of trees, mud, and rocks rumbled towards the Imperial ranks, threatening to crush them underneath. The detachment's magic users immediately flew into action, erecting numerous shields of light and barriers of stone to protect their comrades. Their rushed defenses proved inadequate in the face of mother nature's unleashed fury, and roughly a quarter of their forces found themselves buried under the dirt, or swept down the side of the hill.

What followed was a barrage of arrows and magic from above, let loose by the Republic forces that had triggered the landslide. Hundreds of humans died in those first few seconds, but the damage could have been much, much worse, as the Republic had assigned only seven hundred or so of their drafted adventurers to this plan. While one explanation for this relatively small number was that a larger force would attract attention, the main reason was that they simply could not spare any more troops for this risky endeavor.

As expected, an Imperial regiment was not so easily disrupted. While they did suffer some damage from the landslide and subsequent ambush, their soldiers were far too numerous and durable to be done in by this much. Warriors and Paladins raised their shields to block the incoming ranged

attacks, while Priests chanted large-scale healing magic. Their own Casters and bow users returned fire as numerous men and women slowly dug their way out of the landslide's aftermath.

DO-DO-DO-DOOON

A series of explosions ripped through the Empire's back lines, seemingly targeted at their healers. Although the damage from the metal shrapnel was not enough to outright kill them, it proved sufficient to break their concentration and disrupt their chanting. The powerful, entirely non-magical shockwave also rattled both their bones and their resolve, as they did not see it coming in the slightest.

"Yeah! How'd you like *them* apples!?"

Keira, the main culprit behind the disturbance, shouted tauntingly down the hill. It was mostly for her benefit, though. It wasn't as if her tiny voice could be heard by anyone but those around her.

"Wow. That almost feels like cheating."

"Such violence…"

Yeah! Show those bitches who's boss!

Namely Lola, Jules, and Purupururin, who respectively grumbled, shook their heads, and cheered internally. Of course, those four were part of the ambush. The Republic military had to make the most out of its resources, so the upper brass ordered the vast majority of scouting units, including recon team Three-One, to join up with the strike force and provide fire support. Even a close-ranged Warrior like Lola could contribute thanks to a heavy repeating crossbow of dwarven design. It was a bulky weapon that required a lot of strength to operate, making it impossible for the average noodle-armed Rangers to use efficiently. While it lacked the accuracy, range and damage of a good bow, its dizzying rate of fire made up for it.

However, even that dangerous-looking thing seemed like a toy compared to Keira's newest acquisition.

The beastkin reached back over her shoulder and drew another of her special arrows. Although the shaft was nothing out of the ordinary, the arrowhead was a thick metal cylinder with a long string sticking out of the

underside. Keira put the string in her teeth, nocked the arrow on her bow and took a firing stance. She then pulled her head back just enough to make the string taut as she took aim. When she was ready, she pulled her head back sharply, yanking the string and the pin out of the arrowhead with a small clicking sound.

“Multishot!”

The single arrow split into four as it left her bow. The glinting cylinders flew through the air, just another few drops in a sea of projectiles headed in either direction.

DO-DO-DO-DOOON

Boxxy’s specially designed arrows let out another multi-pronged roar as they exploded on impact with the ground, seemingly at random. One managed to connect to an unfortunate Wizard’s face, ripping it to shreds, while another took off an armored soldier’s arm. It caught the humans completely off guard, as those slim projectiles were almost completely invisible and had far greater range than most Spells capable of such destruction.

DO-DO-DO-DOOON

The next set of explosions wonderfully set fire to the line of stalled supply carts at the back. This had been the shapeshifter’s initial target, but adjusting its aim to compensate for the extra weight and weird shape of those exploding arrowheads had proven difficult. Its personal objective in this attack was to rack up contributions, and targeting the enemy’s stockpile of food, water, and potions seemed like a good idea. After all, an army marched on its stomach, and the upper brass were sure to notice the redhead’s strategically-oriented initiative.

DO-DO-DO-DOOON

Its next target was a group of thirty Imperial soldiers that formed a shield wall towards the front and were steadily climbing up the steep hill towards the elves. The violent explosions didn’t kill any of them, but they did cause another, much smaller landslide that disrupted their balance and sent them falling backwards into each other. Left immobile and out of cover made

them perfect targets for the rest of Republic's strike force, who did not miss the opportunity to rip them to shreds.

Looking over the battlefield with a keen eye from further behind and above Keira was Milo Faehorn. He was the highest-ranking officer around and also the one in command of this operation. Of course, that didn't mean he just sat and watched. His superior Level and Attributes allowed him to attack from a far greater range than the others, so his hands never stopped shooting arrows. His unerring sight kept track of the slowly shifting battlefield, and his decades of experience warned him that this ambush had gone on long enough.

With the element of surprise gone, the Imperial army regiments started to fight back in earnest. The Republic strike force would suffer heavy casualties if this skirmish lasted any longer, and they had already completed their main objective of hampering the enemy's march. With that in mind, Faehorn decided it was time to fall back, and reached for the small wooden tube hanging off his belt. He pointed it towards the sky and pulled on the string coming out of its end, letting loose a glowing red flare that screamed over the battlefield, signaling a retreat. Seeing that bright light, the various adventurers immediately broke off their assault, split up into numerous teams of three-to-six people and scrambled up the side of the hill, over the top, and down the opposite slope.

Faehorn coldly assessed the results of the attack while he watched over the disorderly retreat. They had managed to kill or heavily injure around one-thousand-five-hundred of the Empire's forces within the span of those hectic few minutes. With their cavalry crippled and supplies torched, they would no doubt have a much harder time seizing control of the Clattering Plains. In return, the Republic side suffered relatively minor casualties. He would get an accurate headcount back at base, but for the moment, he estimated they hadn't lost more than fifty people.

There would probably be more if the army seriously gave chase, but that wouldn't happen unless the humans' commander was a complete idiot. The Imperial soldiers would still go after the retreating elves and attempt to pick off or catch any stragglers, but they wouldn't stray too far from the group. Traversing this monster-infested wilderness was something adventurers did

far better than rank-and-file soldiers, so they were bound to have casualties even without facing any enemy combatants.

Before any of that could happen, Faehorn felt the Comm-crystal in his pocket vibrate while he and his troops made their way down the side of that hill. He held it with one hand and answered it, conjuring up the illusory image of a stern-looking information officer.

“Faehorn, this is Forward Command!” he said urgently, not waiting for the elf to confirm his identity. “Be advised, recon team One-Six has spotted a group of five griffins headed towards you from east-by-southeast!”

The high elf turned his gaze towards the specified direction and saw a number of tiny specks in the distance. Using Eagle Eye to augment his vision, he confirmed the presence of five winged creatures, each carrying either a metal container or wooden carriage on its back.

“I see them,” said the old Ranger with a calm voice. “Are they coming after us?”

“Negative. As far as we know they’re not part of the expeditionary force. They probably have no idea their allies had been ambushed.”

“And you would appreciate it if they remained ignorant?” Faehorn hazarded a guess.

“Indeed.”

“Alright, I’ll take care of it.”

“Understood. Forward Command, out.”

Faehorn put away the Comm-crystal and dashed off to intercept the flying beasts. His subordinates knew what to do and where to go, so his presence wasn’t necessary. Instead, he decided to cut down a number of the Empire’s prized griffins. The air superiority they provided was something the elves could not match. While the Republic was home to a military unit of wyvern riders calling themselves the Scale Knights, they were no match for the much larger and more powerful griffins. The humans used them as flying fortresses that could ferry troops and supplies with ease, in addition to using them to scout out enemy positions. It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say

that griffins assisted the Empire with all aspects of warfare, though that was expected of creatures literally bred for war.

However, the Empire clearly had no idea who they were up against, otherwise they would've thought twice about exposing such large and valuable assets to a Ranger of Faehorn's caliber. After setting up atop a nearby boulder, the high elf readied his longbow once more. It was a remarkably plain-looking thing, no fancier than any of the standard issue weapons used by his students. It hinted at its true abilities when its wielder pulled on the bowstring, and a spectral arrow materialized out of thin air, nocked and ready to be let loose. This Artifact-grade item's name was Enduring Gale. Not only would it never run out of ammo so long as the user had MP, but the special arrows it conjured flew remarkably straight since they ignored silly things like wind and gravity.

Taking a deep breath, Faehorn activated a few of his Ranger and Rogue Skills to temporarily boost his accuracy and damage output, then took aim.

"Snipe!"

The magic arrow flew out of his bow too fast for the untrained eye to catch, leaving a faint blue trail in its wake. The projectile flew over a kilometer through the air and struck the lead griffin in its eye. The beast howled in pain and wavered left and right, but did not fall. It would be ludicrous to think that a mere elf could fell such a massive beast with a single projectile, especially such a tiny one. Faehorn also knew this, which was why he had made three more Snipe shots before his first one hit.

One after the other, the spectral arrows buried themselves in the griffin's head, neck, and shoulders, making the winged beast and its passengers plummet in a manner of seconds. Only then had the other four realized they were under fire by an unseen enemy. Though they knew the direction the attack was coming from, the rather absurd distance made it practically impossible for them to mount any sort of counter-offensive. With that in mind, the griffins' handlers had their beasts swing around and beat a hasty retreat. Faehorn managed to bring down a second and severely injure a third before those overgrown pussy-chickens left his range. Unfortunately, the last two escaped completely unharmed. Even though Faehorn shot at them

with all his might, a blur of golden yellow light had managed to deflect each and every shot aimed at them.

“Heh, looks like I missed out on meeting a big shot,” the old elf chuckled.

Though not even Faehorn’s eyes were able to see who was inside that blur, it was fairly obvious they were one of the Empire’s VIPs—a Level 100 ‘Ranker’ like himself. More specifically, an angel like his good friend Lichter by the look of things, which meant they were most likely a Monk or a Paladin. It was a bit irksome that he couldn’t shoot down all of the griffins, but Faehorn decided that killing two and scaring off the rest was good enough. His primary concern was making sure they didn’t interfere with his subordinates’ escape, which he already accomplished. He certainly wasn’t going to catch up to those things on foot, so he decided to call it a day and made his way towards the rendezvous point at Fort Yimin.

Faehorn arrived at the fort the following morning. Much like several other elven fortifications, it was built inside a grove of hylt trees. These five were a lot younger than the ancient ones at the capital, with an estimated age of ‘only’ five hundred years and a height of about three hundred meters. The gaps between them were fortified with stone walls additionally reinforced with processed Ironbark from the hylt trees. The local garrison was home to around ten thousand troops with reinforcements streaming in each day. Though it seemed unlikely to fill out the fort’s maximum capacity of fifteen thousand, it was still the most heavily fortified location in the entire region. It was the Republic’s first real line of defense, as well as the staging area for their adventurer-led hit-and-run tactics, so the elven commanders expected it to be one of the first places hit by a large-scale assault.

The old Ranger marched up to the front gates, where a long line of returning combatants waited to be processed. Each person had to have their identity verified by a Scribe’s Appraisal before being allowed inside, a basic precaution against spies. Faehorn recognized many of the faces he passed by the line, and each gave him a respectful salute or nod. He would’ve liked to stand in line with the rest of them, but he had to consider his position as an officer and act accordingly. He therefore, as politely as possible, cut in front of the line, submitted to a cursory Basic Appraisal, then made his way towards the keep in the middle of the fort.

Once inside the large building, he climbed to the third floor and entered the room labeled ‘Forward Command.’ The large space housed desks overflowing with various reports, multiple shelves filled with various supplies and tools, and numerous maps covered nearly every wall. These were all manned by dozens of people who worked to organize and coordinate the war effort in this part of the country. They were all as busy as one might imagine, but still found the time to give Faehorn a short round of cheers and applause.

The Ranger walked up to a stern-faced, middle-aged elf with ginger hair. He wore a stuffy-looking uniform that consisted of a long-sleeved coat, pressed trousers and black knee-high boots. His clothes were mostly brown in color, except for the sleeves that were black from the elbows down. Noticing Faehorn’s approach, the intelligence officer stood up from his station and greeted him with a salute.

“Good to have you back, sir.”

“Don’t be like that, Silus. You’re technically above me in rank, you know.”

“Perhaps in military rank, but definitely not in ability. *Sir*,” the officer added with a wry grin.

“See, you say that, but I’d never be able to do what you do,” Faehorn shot back.

Indeed, it took a special kind of man to run things as smoothly as Silus Underwood. He was the chief intelligence officer at Fort Yimin, and had the responsibility of managing, collecting, and analyzing the information flowing through his office. Considering he constantly received field reports from nearly fifty separate sources, this was no small task. He had assistants and subordinates to help, of course, but Silus painted the big picture that his superiors looked at when making strategic decisions. Right now, his duties demanded that he and Faehorn retreat inside Silus’s private office for a moment. There would be a full debriefing later on, but the two of them wanted to compare notes beforehand.

“So, how did we do on our mission?” the high elf Ranger asked.

“I believe the words ‘resounding success’ were thrown about here and there,” his ginger colleague declared. “We expect that Imperial detachment to be delayed by at least three weeks before they can replenish their supplies and their numbers.”

“That’s good, I suppose. Do we know how many casualties we inflicted?”

“According to preliminary reports, our ambush eliminated about sixteen hundred enemies.”

“Sounds about right. And those griffins? What was their deal?”

“We’re still trying to figure it out, but signs point towards some kind of strategic strike against our back lines. We’re honestly lucky you managed to intercept them.”

“Yeah… Lucky… What about our losses?”

“We’re still processing all of the ones that returned to base, but we estimate no more than sixty were killed in action or have gone missing.”

“I see. That’s… better than I expected.”

Even if it was an almost insignificant loss from a military standpoint, Faehorn took every death of those under his charge as a personal failure. It was a bad habit from his time serving as an instructor, but he couldn’t help it. He was an adventurer, not a soldier. Even if the notion that the people he laughed and ate with yesterday might be dead the next day was not foreign, he still couldn’t get used to it. Still, he knew how to cope with it, in his own way.

“Then… there’s the matter of the recon team Three-One,” Underwood added.

“Uh… Who?”

“The team consisting of Lola Yeres, Jules Morel, and Keira Morgana, sir. I believe the last one is one of yours, yes?”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. She performed quite well, didn’t she?”

“Indeed. It’s my professional opinion that your ambush wouldn’t have worked as well without her significant contributions in keeping an eye on

the enemy's movements."

It wasn't as if Three-One was the only team tracking the Imperial detachment, but it was fair to say that their commendable efforts were instrumental to the plan's success. Since Keira Morgana was the Ranger in charge of Three-One, it was only natural that she'd get most of the credit. Hearing that she had done an outstanding job made her teacher practically swell with pride.

"Hmm, I expected as much," Faehorn nodded approvingly. "She may be young, but that girl has the best judgement of her entire class."

Of course, Faehorn could have just as easily done the same, but he was unfortunately needed elsewhere. That ambush was just a small part of a much larger conflict, after all. He also noticed those weird arrows the beastkin used in the battle itself, likely yet another gizmo from that golem she had befriended. Their effects were very similar to the Burst Shot Martial Art that any Ranger could learn to use, but being able to combine that effect with Multishot was truly inspired. It allowed her to sow chaos and panic among the enemy ranks, despite her much lower Level.

Faehorn had to admit, he now felt a bit stupid for warning Keira against becoming an Artificer, but wasn't too prideful to admit he was wrong. His initial skepticism was entirely understandable, however. It had only been a century since the Artificer Job's discovery. The gnomes of the Horkensaft Kingdom were still actively developing and exploring the profession at that very moment. Artificers hadn't yet fully figured out their role in society, let alone what military applications their craft could have. Their technology certainly had a lot of potential, but it was difficult to compete with well-established professions with centuries of development behind them, especially magical practices like alchemy or enchantment.

As someone who knew a good trick when he saw one, Faehorn decided he would love to have a chat with his star pupil regarding this new weapon of hers.

"Wait, why did you bring up Morgana's team?" he suddenly realized. "Surely it wasn't just to commend them."

"Yeah, about that…"

Silus Underwood reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a crystal cube that was about eight centimeters on each side. It had a label stuck the side that read ‘3-1.’

That was a Comm-crystal, a magic item that allowed for instantaneous long-distance communication between two people. As vital as it was to this mission, it still had a number of flaws. For one thing, the range was impressive, but not unlimited. It also demanded some of the user’s MP to activate it and was rather expensive to make. Perhaps the most glaring flaw with this magic item was that Comm-crystals were created in pairs, and could only connect to one another. Meaning that if Underwood were to tap on the cube in his hand and activated it by speaking the password, then the only people it could reach would be the adventurers of recon team Three-One.

However, doing that right now would be pointless. For the normally blue-tinged cube had turned a lifeless gray. A clear sign that its paired Comm-crystal had been destroyed.

It was something all recon teams were told to do in the event that they were about to be captured.

Part Three

The group of six men responsible for leading the 8th Imperial Expeditionary Force convened in a large white tent, its canvas stained red by the setting sun. They sat around the three-meter-wide stump of a chopped down hylt tree as if it were a table. In fact, this flat surface was the main reason they pitched the commander's tent over this particular spot. Humans liked their large tables, after all. Perfect for both strategizing and hosting victory banquets. However, the looks on their faces was anything but jovial, making it clear that this would be no celebration.

"So, what's the final verdict?"

Baron Hayhurst, the one in charge of this military expedition, spoke up first. He was a heavy-set man with a short-yet-thick black beard and hair, and he spoke with a commanding tone fitting of his station.

"Permission to speak freely, your lordship?"

The one that answered him was a brown-haired, clean-shaven youth that served as the force's quartermaster.

"Denied. Just give me the facts, Simmons."

"Yes, your lordship. We lost all the horses, almost all our supplies, and one thousand three hundred and forty-six of our men are either dead, crippled, or missing for. All but twelve of the horses are dead, and we lost most of our supplies."

"Disgraceful," said a middle-aged bald man with an eyepatch.

"You're out of line, Hale," the baron chastised him sternly.

"Am I? How many times did I tell you not to underestimate those fucking twigs? I kept telling you a few of my scouting units disappeared over the last few days. That was clearly a sign of them preparing an ambush, but you didn't listen!"

It was at this point that a lanky, blonde-haired man with a bit of a pot belly chimed in.

“With all due respect, sir, they’ve most likely been playing with us from even before we crossed the border.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Hale snapped back.

“The horses. The poison in their bodies was something they’d been carrying for the better part of a week. Even if your scouts managed to spot the ambush coming, it would’ve already been too late to save our cavalry.

“…”

Hale reigned in his outrage and quieted down. As the one in charge of scouting and gathering information, he understood the failure of preventing such sabotage fell squarely on his shoulders.

“How did they manage to poison the horses without anyone noticing?” Hayhurst asked. “And why aren’t any of the men affected?”

“Best as I can gather, the enemy contaminated the wild grass and shrubs along our route with an unknown toxin. The animals’ appetites did the rest.”

Granted, it was just a theory, but it was supported by the fact that the only steeds that survived were the officers’ mounts, which were on a strict diet of specially prepared feed.

“Clever of the damned elves,” the baron remarked. “We’ll need to notify the other regiments to be more careful of what their animals graze on.”

“I’ve already sent word via Comm-crystal, your lordship,” the apothecary bowed his head.

“Very good. Simmons, what’s the state of our camp?”

“We’ve mostly managed to secure our position and establish a perimeter,” the quartermaster replied. “However, we’re having trouble procuring lumber to establish proper fortifications, and what little remained of the supplies will not last us long.”

“What about the supply drops we were supposed to receive via griffins?”

“They reportedly met with heavy anti-air fire and were forced to withdraw.”

“Local procurement efforts, then?”

“… We’re still looking into it, your lordship. Feeding this many soldiers without pre-prepared rations is no easy task”

One that was made even harder given their location on the edge of the Clattering Plains. The endless fields of tall green grass ahead of them had very little in the way of edible wildlife and vegetation. The forest behind them was another story, but human hunting parties tended to make great targets for the Republic’s Rangers. It wasn’t as if the 8th didn’t have Rangers of their own, but their training and Skills were focused on archery and warfare, not exploration and sneak attacks. They were soldiers, not adventurers.

“I guess we’re going to have to wait here until we get reinforced and resupplied,” Hayhurst sighed. “We’re certainly not going to be able to fulfil our original objective without our cavalry.”

“Probably just what those twigs wanted,” Hale spoke up.

“That reminds me, I heard your men captured some prisoners,” the commander changed the subject.

“Yeah, we got three groups of them, eleven in total,” Hale confirmed, “although my men were not too happy about it.”

Hale’s forward scouts had rushed to rejoin the main unit once they’d heard the thunderous roar of that landslide. Though they failed to prevent that masterful ambush, they were nevertheless able to intercept a number of enemy combatants. Some of them tried to fight back and were killed, but those who dropped their weapons in surrender were hastily taken prisoner.

It went without saying that the Imperial foot soldiers wanted righteous vengeance for their fallen comrades, but they couldn’t just kill the surrendering combatants. Doing so would constitute a war crime in the eyes of Axel, the God of War and Combat. The deity was one of honor and duty rather than slaughter and destruction, so he abhorred the merciless killing of those who had lost the will to fight and had admitted defeat. Any soldier who did so would find themselves branded as a heretic, and their side of the conflict would lose favor with Axel. The same applied to those that perpetrated other war crimes, but the killing of prisoners and

noncombatants were the main sins that common grunts needed to be wary of.

Hayhurst himself didn't complain, as he would have wanted at least some of the Republic's troops captured even without some divine being's meddling.

"Did you manage to get anything useful out of them?" he inquired.

"No, and it's unlikely we will," Hale reported. "They're all simple conscripts without any documents or maps on them. They'd been getting their orders via Comm-crystals, but those were all broken either before or during their official surrender."

"Hm. I expected as much."

It was possible to peer into how a Comm-crystal was used by reading the residual magic imprinted within the crystal due to a commonly known quirk of their design. A skilled Enchanter could use those remnants to replay any and all communications used within the last thirty hours or so. It was theoretically possible to eliminate this security risk, but that would reduce the Comm-crystals' range from a few dozen kilometers to about twenty meters, rendering them effectively pointless.

"What about interrogations?"

"Pointless. There's no way those twigs would tell those grunts more than they need to know. If any of them knew something of value, then they wouldn't let themselves be captured in the first place."

"Excuse me, your lordship?" the quartermaster raised his hand.

"What is it, Simmons?"

"I've heard talk among some of the men about… 'using' the female elves we captured."

"Tell them to keep it in their pants. We're not savages."

"Savages that would resort to ambushes and poison, then run away from a fair fight?"

“That was *strategy*, Simmons,” the baron said sternly. “The fact we got done in so completely by a bunch of lowly adventurers merely proves our own failure as officers and soldiers of the Empire.”

Although similar on the surface, there was a huge difference in mindset between an adventurer and a soldier. While trained military personnel were generally speaking stronger in a straight up confrontation, they were not nearly as flexible or adaptable as a skilled adventuring party. The main problem with including both types of people in an army was that of authority, as adventurers actively questioned orders they deemed stupid, suicidal, or both. They also lacked the knowledge and discipline that was crucial to pulling off large-scale tactics and formations. Even if the Republic forces’ hillside ambush was effective, their disorderly retreat proved just how difficult it was to coordinate between so many small groups out for themselves.

However, the leaders of the 8th Imperial Expeditionary Force had clearly underestimated the creativity and resourcefulness of the Ishigar Republic’s adventurers. The one-sided loss they had suffered earlier that day was humbling, to say the least. None of these six men were willing to let it happen again.

“Shall I send word to have our superiors send us some consultants, your lordship?” Simmons offered.

“Indeed. Just make sure they triple-check their backgrounds. The last thing I need is for some blasted spy to worm themselves into my regiment. Next, I want to discuss where we go from here.”

The setting sun slowly but surely descended beyond the horizon as the post-ambush debriefing carried on. The darkness of night had firmly settled in by the time the meeting was adjourned. Tonight was also cloudy, leaving torches and lamps as the only sources of light within the sea of tents in the Imperial camp. Magical illumination was also present, of course, but that was reserved for lighting up the perimeter beyond the camp’s hastily-erected guard towers, ramparts, fences, and other fortifications. The fact that the Imperials had managed to set all this up in less than half a day was a testament to their tenacity.

Quartermaster Simmons walked out of the command tent, parted ways with the other officers and made his way over to where the prisoners were kept. A total of five steel cages lined up in the open and surrounded by several guards. Two of the men stationed there greeted the officer with salutes while the others remained vigilant. The quartermaster then informed the soldiers of Lord Hayhurst's decree—the elven prisoners were not to be touched. He then left them to their duties so he could attend to his.

"That's a shame," one of the guards grumbled. "They really are quite the beauties, aren't they?"

He turned around and looked them over. Of the eleven captured prisoners, six were female. Although this ratio was nothing special as far as adventurers were concerned, the Imperial army was overwhelmingly male. In fact, there was not a single woman within this entire five-thousand-strong detachment. Even if that weren't the case, it would be doubtful that they'd have the sort of attractive figures that female adventurers seemed to cultivate.

"I'll say," murmured his colleague. "The tall one with the black hair is totally my type too."

"The abs are a turnoff for me. Much prefer the green-haired one on the right. She's got some commendable 'mana tanks,' if you know what I mean."

Of course, being made prisoner meant the vast majority of their possessions had been taken from them, leaving them in just their undergarments. Not only that, but the fact they had MP-draining collars around their necks and enchanted steel bindings around their wrists and ankles only seemed to fuel certain fantasies. In short, the sight of those women was like spotting an oasis in the middle of a desert from the perspective of the common Imperial soldier.

"Still, that Simmons sure is something to take our joke to the baron himself."

"I'll say. Gotta be careful what we say around that guy."

The common Imperial soldier also had far too much discipline and decorum to do something as unsightly as forcing themselves on these women just because they felt bitter or pent-up. Not only was it amoral, illegal, and unprofessional, but also a potential security risk. Admittedly, such incidents occurred regardless, but they were extremely uncommon and the perpetrators were severely punished by their own superiors.

The Ishigar Republic's propaganda stated otherwise, of course. The elven government spent many decades subtly convincing their citizens that the Empire's military was full of bigoted, warmongering rapists. The underhanded smear campaign had been largely successful, too. Most elves would instantly believe it if someone told them an Imperial soldier had either sexually or violently assaulted them for no reason.

Incidentally, this same mentality had also helped a certain shape-shifting box better blend in with elven society.

"It really is a huge shame though," the first guard repeated after a few minutes.

"Hey, come on, you're better than that," his colleague reminded him.

"Easy for you to say. I haven't had a chance to do it in months, and then we got sent out here."

"I know, and I feel you, but you heard Simmons. The elves are not to be touched."

"So, it's okay as long as it's not the elves, right?"

"What?"

The guard nodded his head towards the cage at the far end—the one that had only a single occupant in it. It was a redheaded beastkin girl with feline ears and a tail. She had her own cage since she had made quite the unfavorable impression during the battle. More than a few people could identify her as the culprit responsible for torching most of their supplies with those weird arrows of hers. Her crimson hair and tanned skin stood out immensely, even in the heat of battle.

"You can't be serious," the second man exclaimed.

“Why not?”

“She’s a prisoner. Also, she’s basically still a kid. Not to mention she’s a freaking cat.”

“A cat is fine too.”

“I can’t believe we’re even having this conversation!”

“Have you actually taken a good look at her?”

The sensible one rolled his eyes, but had to admit he hadn’t actually done so. He ended up almost unthinkingly staring at her exposed body. Of course, the prisoner could hear them perfectly, and she glared daggers at them while curling up to cover up her features with her hands and knees. That did little to conceal her unearthly charm, however. The guard found himself momentarily captivated by the sight of her slim-yet-feminine body as the light of the surrounding torches danced around her. Even that unpleasant expression of hers—halfway between fear and disgust—radiated a fierce kind of charm.

“Okay, you might have a point there,” he consented after a while.

“Look,” whispered the other guard. “We can just take her in for ‘interrogation.’ Nobody has to know, right? The other lads can all have a turn. It’s the least we can do to pay her back for all she’d done earlier.”

The other man found his resolve wavering. They’d all had an exceptionally grueling day, and were then unlucky enough to pull guard duty for most of the night. To say he felt stressed out would be an understatement. Not to mention that he couldn’t get the image of that near-naked catgirl out of his head, no matter how hard he tried. All these factors made it so that, despite his better judgement, he went along with this clearly immoral plan.

“I guess… We wouldn’t *technically* be violating our orders… What about the other lads, though?”

“You’re right, I’ll go have a chat with them.”

The other guards stationed there were then quietly let in on the scheme. There’d be repercussions if they were found out, and it was a clearly stupid idea. Yet they all eventually joined in with a shared promise of keeping

what they were about to do a secret between ‘the lads.’ Sure, the prisoner might say something, but it would be her word against theirs.

Thus, in the middle of the night, when they were sure everyone but the perimeter guards were asleep, the two ‘masterminds’ quietly carried off the heavy cage with the catgirl in it. She had fallen asleep, but woke up when she felt she was being moved. Fearing what was about to happen, she rattled her chains in a blind panic. She opened her mouth in an attempt to scream, but the magic collar on her neck prevented her voice from leaking out. Her resistance was cut short when one of the guards pointed a blade at her throat, sending a very clear message—just because they couldn’t kill her didn’t mean they couldn’t make her suffer.

The redhead broke down and sobbed silently as she was brought inside a small tent in the darker section of the large camp. One of the guards unlocked her cage and started taking off the lower portion of his armor. The other one remained just inside the entrance to the tent as a lookout. He was going to make sure nobody disturbed them while also keeping in an eye on the prisoner in case she tried anything stupid.

It was thus that the beastkin girl’s lower garment was thoughtlessly ripped off as the man forced himself inside her. He was then instantly overwhelmed by a wave of pleasure far greater than anything he’d expected. He would’ve probably drowned in it if his buddy didn’t snap his neck while he was distracted. The seemingly traitorous soldier then took off his glove and transformed his index finger into a key, which he used to unlock and remove the prisoner’s bindings.

“You said you’d let me have my fun,” the catgirl-shaped succubus complained. “I was really getting into the role-play too.”

It had been far too long since she’d wringed a man dry, and this ‘raped while bound and gagged’ thing greatly appealed to her masochistic tendencies.

“I changed my mind,” her master replied. “We wasted too much time on this part of the plan, so shut up and get ready for phase three.”

“Yes, Master.”

Though the succubus had reservations about this hastily concocted scheme, she had to admit it went off better than she anticipated.

It started when Boxxy had underestimated the Imperial scouts that chased its team during the messy retreat following the hillside ambush. Realizing that it wouldn't be possible to get all of them out of there without compromising its public persona, the shapeshifter decided to use this opportunity to infiltrate the enemy's ranks. To that end, it had Xera take over its role as Keira without Lola, Jules, or even Purupururin noticing. The succubus then used the beastkin's authority as the team's leader to convince them to surrender before they were caught and killed.

While team Three-One was being taken into custody—aside from the ivory succubus, who was killed on the spot since Axel's Taboo didn't extend to magical servants—Boxxy enacted phase two of its plan. It used the Broken Reflection Skill on a random soldier. The man's pilfered memories made Boxxy's job a lot easier as it infiltrated the humans' ranks and scouted out their camp. From then on, it was a simple matter of finding out where the prisoners were and secretly replacing one of their guards when they went to take a bathroom break.

This was when it encountered a minor snag, as it had taken a fair bit of time to separate Keira from the other prisoners in preparation for the next part of the plan. Though it had initially promised Xera she could have her way with the poor sap she enticed into 'raping' her, a succubus's lethal intercourse session could take anywhere from ten minutes to a half hour. The other men guarding the prisoners would most likely realize something was going on if their colleagues took that long to return. Letting the succubus 'have her fun' simply wasn't worth risking the entire plan.

One could argue that Boxxy shouldn't have promised her anything to begin with, but it was the sort of argument that would end with someone getting their face bitten off.

As for the reason why the juvenile doppelganger went through all this trouble, it was to give 'Keira' a plausible means of escape. Boxxy also secretly procured some important-looking documents earlier that afternoon, which it intended to bring back to its commanding officers. All of this would surely make its rookie Ranger persona seem like a genuine war hero.

Boxxy's alter ego would surely receive special treatment and perks from her peers and superiors if this plan succeeded. It would also go a long way towards advancing its Doppelganger Job progression, which was the whole point of the Keira thing to begin with.

"Ah, crap," the shapeshifter realized something.

"What is it, Master?"

"I can't leave without the other prisoners."

"I suppose that's true," the succubus agreed.

Keira Morgana was supposed to be kind-hearted and fiercely loyal to her friends, so having her selfishly escape by herself would be both out of character and quite unheroic. Breaking all of them out of Imperial custody and successfully guiding the group back to base would doubtlessly be incredibly impressive, but also impossible to do without Boxxy revealing its true nature. After all, it was not the sort of feat a sixteen-year-old, Level 29 Ranger could pull off by herself. However, it would be entirely plausible if the harrowing breakout took place while the Empire soldiers had something a lot more important than escaping prisoners to deal with.

The shapeshifter's hastily-concocted scheme was then replaced by an even less planned-out course of action.

Back at the other cages, both the stationed guards and the now-awake prisoners were getting restless, albeit for entirely different reasons. It was not a secret to any of them as to why Keira was carried off, but almost thirty minutes had passed since then. Just as the guards were thinking of doing something about it, they spotted something in the air. Something so surreal that it took them a few crucial moments to process it.

Blazing through the night sky was a Meteor, a destructive siege-type Spell available to mid-Level Pyromancers. Judging from the size of it, this one held quite a bit of power. Guards and prisoners alike stared in silent shock as the inexplicable thing crashed somewhere into the opposite end of the camp.

"Enemy attack!" someone shouted after the fact.

The thunderous roar and gigantic fireball instantly kicked the soldiers' trained bodies into gear. The sounds of battle could be heard in the distance within the next few seconds as the Imperial army engaged whoever or whatever was attacking their position. The sounds of men screaming, Spells exploding, and metal clashing against metal all intensified as more and more awoken soldiers rushed towards the site of the disturbance.

The guards watching the prisoners wanted to join, but they couldn't abandon their posts. The possibility of this being a distraction to free the prisoners was high considering the timing involved. It was ludicrous to think that this raid and their two colleagues going missing was unrelated, so they resolved themselves to stay firmly in place unless ordered otherwise. Much to their surprise, they soon realized they didn't need to go to the battle.

Because the battle came to them.

Two towering figures, each of them well over two meters tall, made their way through the sea of Imperial soldiers in front of them. One was a four-armed, red skinned woman that sent grown men flying with each swing of her armored fists. The two metallic horns on either side of her wild green hair made it perfectly clear she was a demon. Her well-muscled body was covered in wounds oozing with black blood, yet they didn't seem to slow her down in the slightest. In fact, judging from the ecstatic look on her face, she was having the time of her life.

The other figure was a heavy-set man wrapped in a plain, brown cloak thoroughly soaked in fresh blood. His face and hair were wrapped in a blue cloth, showing only a pair of yellow eyes glowing slightly from within. He held a sword in each hand, and wielded the twin blades with deadly efficiency. Every time he swung, a soldier lost his head amidst a fountain of blood. Every time he took a step, the very ground shook beneath his feet. Perhaps worst of all, every time he got hit, he just shrugged it off with a laugh.

And what a laugh it was.

"Shhhaah haaah heeeeh hah-haaah! Ahah! Ahah! Ahehehehahaaah!"

It changed in pitch and cadence at random, but nevertheless clearly carried itself over the sound of bloodshed around it. It was at once malicious and psychotic, but also dreadfully innocent and mocking. It sounded almost like a mean-spirited boy bullying something far smaller and weaker than himself because he didn't know any better. Though the four-armed demon's appearance was certainly formidable and intimidating, it was nothing when compared to the nightmare-inducing terror that practically radiated from that *thing*.

The underwear-soiling fear that seemed to overcome the humans whenever they looked at this intruder wasn't their own. Not entirely, at least. Much of it had been induced by the combination of Butcher of Humanity Perk and its newly-acquired Despair Aura Skill. The Empire trained its soldiers to recognize and resist mental attacks like this, but there was also the matter of the genuine terror one felt when seeing their comrades in arms slaughtered with such ease. It was a testament to the soldiers' courage and spirit that they didn't just instantly scatter in all directions.

Of course, it wasn't just Boxxy and Kora running wild. A slim, vaguely spider-shaped shadow moved across the chaotic battlefield, reaping the lives of humans with silent glee. Drea happily impaled, stabbed, dismembered and took bites out of any soldiers she came across within her master's vicinity. She had no idea a noisy place like this could be to her liking, but it definitely was. The way Boxxy's terror-inspiring presence demanded everyone's attention meant she was free to move around as she pleased. Some of those men didn't even realize those standing right next to them had been suddenly robbed of their lives, and the ones that did only sank deeper into despair.

And as if to punctuate all this, another Meteor—the third one of the night—came crashing down on top of them. The resulting shockwave and flames quickly scattered the surrounding army, creating a lull in the battle. The prisoners, who silently watched the carnage unfold from the sidelines, shielded their eyes and faces as the wave of light and heat washed over them, their cages rattling from the impact. By the time they looked back at the masked intruder, he was the only one left standing amidst a sea of death,

smoke, and flames. He looked straight at them, sending shivers down their spines.

Much to their surprise, he didn't attack them, nor did he free them. He simply drank a few potions, re-summoned the mostly-dead fiend to replenish her strength, then disappeared. Several tense seconds passed before the sounds of carnage picked up once more from elsewhere in the camp.

"Guys! I'm here!"

It was at this point that a scantily-clad beastkin appeared from the shadows. Lola's voice was silenced by the collar on her neck, but she still mouthed the words, 'Keira, are you okay? What's going on?'

"I'm fine," the redhead replied without skipping a beat, "and I don't know, but we need to get out of here!"

She hurriedly unlocked their cages and bindings with a set of keys, then took charge of the ten ex-prisoners. None of them complained as she guided them through the desolate portions of the camp. They ran into a few small pockets of Imperial troops, but used whatever weapons they managed to pick up off the ground to fight their way through. Thankfully, the humans were far too disorganized to pay them any real mind, allowing the adventurers to successfully flee into the wilderness of the Clattering Plains. It was still the dead of night without a hint of natural light, but the group figured they'd be fine so long as they kept that burning camp at their backs.

It wasn't until about an hour and several kilometers later that the group finally stopped running and took stock of their situation. They were cold, hungry, tired, and in the open with absolutely no cover, but they were free. The adrenaline rush of their rushed escape had long faded by now, leaving them with a vague sense of dread and unease. Most of them felt like throwing up when they thought back to that terrible bloodshed they'd witnessed.

Even the normally stoic and fearless Lola found herself dry heaving after her first real experience of warfare, though it was at least partially because she felt had overexerted herself. Jules and a dwarven Druid from another recon team had been slowing the group down, so she had taken it upon

herself to carry both of them, one on each shoulder. The result was the abnormally athletic Warrior driving herself to total physical exhaustion, with rivers of sweat pouring out of her entire body.

Lola couldn't ask any questions during the frantic run, but now that she finally got a chance to catch her breath, questions were all she had. A lot of them were about Keira, such as how she had managed to escape her captors and what was in that weird bag she was carrying. Some were directed towards more general concerns, such as where they'd find food and whether they'd be able to make it back to base without their gear.

However, looking at the distant glow of the still-blazing camp at the edge of the plains, there was only one question that Lola could voice first.

"Who, or *what*, was that?"

"That, I believe," Keira smiled weakly, "was the Sandman."

Part Four

“Wait, you mean *the Sandman*?!” one of the male elves exclaimed. “As in, the guy that single-handedly decimated Azurvale’s criminal underworld?!”

“Well, yeah… I mean, maybe… I don’t know, could be?”

Keira’s wavering response did little to reassure the man.

“Look, I’m not sure if that’s really the Sandman from the rumors,” Lola butted in, “but I’ve seen that guy before. We caught a glimpse of him a week ago when we were sent to clear out a group of bandits.”

“Wh-what happened to those bandits,” he asked her.

“Gone without a trace. Not even blood was left behind.”

“And you’re sure it’s the same one?”

“Trust me, there’s not a lot of guys taller than me. I’d almost think he was a demon or something if not for his lack of horns.”

“Oh, right,” Jules mumbled from the side. “I should probably summon my familiar now that I have the chance.”

The Warlock had put off doing so because of the danger involved. Standing perfectly still for ten whole seconds in the middle of a war zone while concentric circles of light swirled around him seemed like an immensely stupid idea. But, now that they were out of that damned camp and too far away for the light show to attract any unwanted attention, he wasted no more time in summoning his familiar. All eyes were on Purupururin when she materialized out of thin air—dressed in high heels, lacy stockings, matching gloves, a fetishistic corset, and a positively tiny thong. As scandalous as that outfit was, the succubus was still the most modestly dressed person in the group.

An absurd-sounding, yet true fact that all of the adventurers seemed to realize at the same time.

“Oh, right!” Keira exclaimed. “I managed to find everyone’s stuff!”

She took the large leather bag strapped around her shoulder and began emptying its contents out on the ground. It turned out to be a high-class Bag of Holding that the humans were using to store the prisoners' confiscated belongings.

"You seriously went around looking for those?" questioned the man from before.

"I know it was a stupid thing to do, but… I couldn't just leave these behind."

She solemnly rubbed the three steel rings on her right hand.

"Besides," she added, "I don't think we'll make it that far just in our underwear."

The group may have 'borrowed' some weapons during their escape, but they'd been so focused on running away that none aside from Keira had even considered to look for anything else.

"I suppose it was the right call," Lola nodded. "How *did* you break out, exactly?"

"Hmm? What are you saying, Lola?" Keira replied with an aloof smile. "We were together the entire time, weren't we? That mysterious stranger freed us, yes?"

"Huh? But you got carried off by-"

"We. Got. Freed. Together. *Right?!*"

"… Right."

It was painfully obvious she didn't want to talk about what had transpired after she was separated from the group. The others made grim expressions as they silently got dressed. They shared a few worried looks and wordlessly agreed not to touch that particular topic, at least for the moment.

"Say, that's weird," Jules spoke up. "I don't see my staff. Or my rings, for that matter."

His clothes, armor, cloak, and alchemical field kit were all there, but the mithril-tipped staff and enchanted jewelry were gone. Others also couldn't

find whatever magical or valuable items had been taken from them.

“I dunno. Maybe they put the fancy stuff in a different bag or something?” Keira shrugged.

It certainly wasn’t like some shiny-obsessed monster stole those items specifically.

“More like the thieving bastards kept the expensive stuff for themselves,” someone else complained. The rest readily agreed.

This vitriolic assertion wasn’t entirely caused by propaganda-fueled prejudice. Unlike soldiers, adventurers had to procure and provide for their own equipment, so having their most prized possessions wind up missing was a bitter pill to swallow.

“How come only *her* valuables were left behind?” one of the other female Rangers pointed at Keira.

“These rings are sentimental, you jackass,” the redhead snapped at her. “They’re not magical, they just… Look, I know you’re angry, but I grabbed what I could, okay?”

“Yeah, you’re right. I’m sorry for saying that,” the Ranger quickly apologized. “It wasn’t fair. Really, thank you, for everything.”

With that matter settled, everyone geared up. The group began the long trek back to base, unsure of what to think of the evening’s events. Except for the two succubi in their midst. It went without saying that the one masquerading as Keira knew exactly what had transpired, seeing as she helped make it happen. Purupururin, on the other hand, had watched the Boxxy show with great interest while she was ‘away.’ She couldn’t help but be impressed at how masterfully her fellow succubus played her part as Keira. Then again, it was hardly surprising considering her heavy involvement in the development of the persona.

Back on Boxxy’s side, it continued its indiscriminate rampage, and managed to slaughter around seven hundred of the Empire’s soldiers before being forced to pull back. It would have gladly continued, but it was running out of steam. Even if Butcher of Humanity constantly replenished bits of its HP and MP, it didn’t mean it could fight indefinitely. Still, it

lasted much longer than it would have otherwise, and was genuinely thankful for having this Perk for the first time in its life.

As expected, the Doppelganger Job barely went up to Level 22 despite having murdered a large number of people during the first phase of the attack. It once again reaffirmed that the Job wasn't a battle-oriented one. That said, it wondered whether it should look into getting a Job that focused on melee combat, hopefully one that could make use of as many of its varied Attributes as possible. In any event, it had realized partway through the massacre that it was wasting valuable combat XP fighting the humans in close quarters and switched to using only Spells and familiars. Thanks to that, it managed to advance its Warlock Job all the way up to Level 47, giving it access to a tasty new Skill.

[Soul Link]
The Warlock's demonic servants are made to share both the boons and burdens of life.
Requirements: Level 45 Warlock, Demonology
Type: Sustained
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 10 MP/sec
Range: 100 Meters
[Active Effects]
Transfers 30% of the damage taken by one familiar to all other familiars.
Temporary effects bestowed upon one familiar will also be bestowed to all other familiars.
[Passive Effects]
Increases the HP of all summoned familiars by 3% per Level of this Skill.
Reduces the MP cost of this Skill by 50% at Level 5 of this Skill.
Merges the telepathic links between the summoner and their familiars into a single channel.

This Skill had several potential applications, but they all equated to the same result—its minions would be much harder to kill. It also allowed Boxxy to use the relatively short-ranged Dark Infusion Spell to power up all three of its familiars at once, as long as they were within the very generous one-hundred-meter range of Soul Link. This would, in theory, also work

with other strengthening effects, such as a Priest's magical blessing or alchemical elixirs. However, it seemed likely this ability would also spread negative effects, such as the dark chains summoned by its Shadowbind Spell. Boxxy would need to experiment with the Skill to determine its limits, but it didn't have the time for that at present.

As for the 'merging of telepathic links into a single channel,' it basically meant that all of the demons could now mind-talk to one another and their master, which made communication easier.

The monstrous Warlock had also learned two new Spells after rising to Level 47. One was a Ruin Spell called Reality Slash, which allowed it to launch an invisible blade that did physical damage rather than magical. It seemed useful for cutting through anti-magic defenses, but was a lot less effective against armor. The other one was Mind Control, which did exactly what its name implied. Boxxy already possessed the far superior Puppet Parasite Skill, so that particular Spell would probably never see much use. It honestly considered most of the Domination Spells at its disposable to be rather lacking and unreliable. Even Mass Panic Spell Crystals were obsolete considering the combination of Butcher of Humanity and Despair Aura had pretty much the same effect. It was a bit disappointing, but the shapeshifter didn't think it too big an issue since it hadn't gone out of its way to acquire those Spells.

This was unlike that Fleet Footed Ranger Skill it was forced to pick up. The slight bonuses that Ranger Skill provided to its Agility (AGI) Attribute were really all it was good for. The monster really didn't feel like picking it up, but it had little choice in the matter. Adventurer guilds had mandatory Full Appraisals every now and then, and Essence Concealment could only hide parts of its actual Status, not show things that weren't there. Therefore, Faehorn would eventually find out if Boxxy only pretended to pick Fleet Footed. Ignoring the old elf's sage advice was a very un-Keira-like thing to do, so it had already given up on the Skill as a necessary sacrifice.

While Boxxy enjoyed the rewards of that Imperial harvest, the group of eleven Republic escapees continued steadily making their way towards Fort Yimin. After skillfully establishing herself as the de-facto leader, Xera volunteered to watch their backs while another Ranger took the lead. It was

unlikely any of the 8th Imperial Expeditionary Force would dare chase after them considering the losses Boxxy had incurred, but the escapees wouldn't know that. It was also the perfect excuse to allow the succubus and her Master to stealthily swap places (and outfits) while the others took a brief rest in the shade of one of the few hylt trees in the Clattering Plains.

They reached Fort Yimin shortly before sundown, almost a full day after the rest of their allies. Unsurprisingly, their sudden and unexpected appearance caused a bit of an uproar. The higher-ups had more or less written them off as dead, and yet here they were— exhausted, starving, and thirsty, but most definitely alive. Their identities were confirmed through Appraisal, after which they were taken in to be asked a bunch of questions.

That was how Keira found herself in a tiny room of wood and stone. The walls were depressingly bare and dull and the only furniture around was a small square table in the middle with two chairs on opposite ends. The catgirl sat in one, happily devouring the small plate of grilled meat in front of her. She wasn't quite sure what animal it came from, nor did she care. The superb taste of human flesh was still fresh in the back of her throat, so she focused on that vividly delicious memory as she thoughtlessly scarfed down whatever this meal was.

At that point, Boxxy began to consider the merits of learning how to preserve meat. Thoughts of human jerky, smoked liver, pickled hearts, and salted fingers passed through its mind, causing its appetite to flare up even more. Eating those things bloody raw was preferable, but there had been far too many bodies for it to devour in one go back in that fight. It had to regretfully leave most of them behind, and the six corpses it put inside its Storage were going to start rotting pretty soon. Besides, cooking those tasty things with other moderately tasty things was bound to let them reach new pinnacles of tastiness, right?

The monster therefore deemed that learning to cook was an endeavor worthy of its time. The Cooking Skill was a general Skill that anyone could acquire and Level Up if they put the time and effort in, not unlike Stealth or Meditation. Boxxy had no idea what exactly the Skill did, but it knew it to be like a miniature and condensed version of the Alchemist Job. Since the

shapeshifter thought it did a great job mixing up the ingredients required for the Ritual of Unholy Wealth, it figured cooking couldn't be that difficult.

Thinking on it some more, Boxxy realized something. If cooking wasn't all that difficult, and anyone could learn the Skill, then the shapeshifter didn't really need to do so personally. In fact, having someone else put the work in only for the selfish monster to reap the benefits sounded like a much tastier concept. Now, if only it knew someone gullible enough to waste their own time and effort for the sake of a man-eating murder-box.

Oh wait, it did.

[Boxxy: Ambrosia, are you there?]
[Ambrosia: Greetings, milord. 'Tis good to hear thou art in good health.]
[Boxxy: Ah, yes, hello. Anyway, you can't cook, right?]
[Ambrosia: 'Tis so, milord. I get mine sustenance from the ground beneath mine roots and the sun above mine leaves, after all.]
[Boxxy: Can you learn to cook, then? For my sake?]
[Ambrosia: It would be mine honor, nay, mine pleasure to master the culinary arts in thy name, milord!]
[Boxxy: Very good. Just make sure you focus on meat-based recipes. Use the prisoners for ingredients.]
[Ambrosia: Understood. I shalt make sure to prepare a feast for thy triumphant return.]

Well, wasn't she enthusiastic? Boxxy actually looked forward to the very capable dryad's results after hearing that. It had some doubts whether the dryad's tastes would line up with its own, or whether a sentient piece of vegetation was capable of tasting things in the first place. Still, it was hardly an issue. Worst case scenario—it would just teach Ambrosia what sort of food it liked best and have her prepare it. That would have to wait until later, however. For now, it needed to focus on this tiny room it was locked in, as well as the people it sensed gathering outside the door.

The door opened to reveal the grizzled face of Faehorn, as well as the stern-looking communications officer Keira had been in touch with until recently. The veteran adventurer sat down opposite the catgirl, while the other stood at attention behind him.

“Keira Morgana,” he said with a dry voice.

Keira swallowed her mouthful of meat loudly while breaking out into a cold sweat. His attitude was very reminiscent of how he behaved during her training. A few tense moments passed before a relieved smile floated onto her teacher’s face.

“It is good to see you’re alive, kid.”

“Th-thank you, sir.”

“And I believe you already know Primus Silus Underwood from the FIB.”

He gestured at the man behind him. He and Keira nodded to each other in greeting. Of course, Boxxy was surprised when it heard the name ‘Underwood’ during its briefing more than a week ago, as it had used that alias during its departure from the Empire. It quickly learned this was just a weird coincidence. The only reason it chose the name ‘Chester Underwood’ back in Bootlick was because it thought of itself as a *wood*en *chest* that had gone *under*cover. It thought it was being clever at the time, but Snack kindly pointed out this was actually an idiotic name, so it picked something far less obvious for its next public persona.

After exchanging greetings, Faehorn began interviewing Keira regarding the events that had taken place since they last saw each other while Silus mostly stood and listened. The catgirl relayed a similar story as the rest of the escapees. Their team found themselves surrounded and surrendered as prisoners of war under Axel’s protection, but not before shattering the Comm-crystal as instructed. They were then stripped of their belongings, locked up, and took the opportunity to escape when a mysterious figure raided the Imperial army’s camp.

There was just one discrepancy that Faehorn wanted to address.

“So, you say you were freed by this Sandman character?”

“Y-yes?”

“I already know that’s not what happened, Keira.”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“Some of the others said you were taken away in the middle of the night by some men and came back looking… disheveled.”

“…”

The beastkin fell silent and looked down at her hands, avoiding her mentor’s eyes.

“Did they do anything to you while you were separated?”

“N-no…”

“You’re absolutely sure? *Nothing* happened to you?”

“…”

“Keira. Don’t make me fetch an interrogator.”

“…”

“Ah… damn, I’m no good at this…”

“Allow me, sir.”

Silus spoke up for the first time since coming into the room, then traded places with Faehorn.

“First of all, I apologize for Faehorn’s stern words. I want you to understand, you are here among friends, and you are not under any suspicion or in any sort of trouble.”

The catgirl gave a small nod.

“Now, as good as it is to see you’ve made it back, we need to know where and how you obtained the documents you brought us.”

He was referring to the ‘present’ that Keira had brought back—a bunch of maps and letters that a rookie conscript like her would have no chance of understanding.

“Is it okay if I ask you a few simple questions?”

“Sure. I mean, uh, yes, sir,” she quickly corrected herself.

“Very good. Now then, according to your dossier, you have decently developed Lockpick and Stealth Skills. Is this correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I am also led to believe that your claws can be quite dangerous when used properly.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Meaning you used your natural born gifts and basic Skills to break free of your bindings while your captors were otherwise distracted.”

“Yes, sir,” she repeated yet again.

Faehorn raised an eyebrow in admiration. He was honestly quite impressed at how tactfully Silus skirted the heavy topic that he failed to approach directly. It was quite clear that, judging from what he heard, the catgirl had been sexually assaulted during her imprisonment. While that both was and wasn’t the case in reality, it was still the only conclusion he could reach. It was a sensitive issue that he clearly had no idea how to approach. He usually let his friend Lichter do the talking whenever things like this propped up. The Paladin had always been the ‘people person’ of Faehorn’s adventuring party, as he was a lot more tactful than the other two. Unfortunately, the angelic elf had been stationed somewhere else entirely, so the Ranger couldn’t rely on him this time around.

“Why did you not escape immediately upon freeing yourself?” Underwood inquired. “Why take the extra risk to find the prisoners’ belongings?”

“Because we wouldn’t get far without them,” she answered curtly. “Facing the wilderness without the right tools is tantamount to suicide.”

Her mood seemed to improve as she said that, as did Faehorn’s. He felt proud that this girl remembered his ramblings, even under those dire circumstances.

“Did you run across these papers while searching for your equipment?” Silus continued.

“Not exactly. I only just found our stuff when Sandman started making noise and the whole camp rose up in arms. I was desperately running from cover to cover, trying to stay hidden and too afraid of being found out what with all those soldiers running around. I somehow stumbled upon this big tent with a bunch of important-looking charts and stuff. I figured they might

be useful, so grabbed as many as I could and stuffed them in the bag while I had the chance."

"I see, so that's how it was. Tell me, this 'Sandman' character, do you know him?"

"No," she shook her head. "We did meet though, back in Azurvale. Well, not 'meet' meet, but… You know…"

"You had an encounter."

"Yeah, that."

"Alright, and what happened afterwards?"

"Well, some guards showed up and took me in, then gave me a stern talking to."

"They did what?" Silus raised a curious eyebrow.

"Yeah, I didn't get it, either. I was the one that got mugged, yet I still felt like I was being arrested. It took forever before me and my, uh, roommate were allowed to go home."

Faehorn failed to stifle a chuckle while his colleague pinched his nose with a sigh.

"I meant, what happened after you got those papers?" he clarified.

"Oh! Right! Sorry!" Keira apologized messily. "I, uhm, I followed after the path that guy opened up. He was just cutting his way through their camp, you know! He was super strong and really amazing! He had all these tough-looking demons and these flashy lights, then these huge fiery rocks fell down, and-"

Underwood raised a hand to interrupt and calm down the overly-enthusiastic catgirl.

"And that's how you re-joined the others, did you?"

"Ah, yeah. That's right. Sir."

"Very good, miss Morgana. That's all I needed to hear from you."

The stern-looking elf stood up, leaned over the table and whispered gently.

“I know some excellent people that can help you deal with any and all emotional troubles you might have. I can point you to them if you ever feel the need to let something heavy off your chest.”

“I… I don’t-”

“Remember, the wounds we can’t see are often the deadliest. Best to get them treated immediately.”

“I see… Just a wound, is it? I think I’ll do that, then. Thanks, mister Underwood,” she said with a weak smile.

“Think nothing of it, trooper,” he answered with a faint smile. “Now then, it’s a bit sudden and informal, but we’re in a bit of a rush, so please bear with me and step outside.”

“Y-yes, sir. Right behind you.”

Underwood’s face tensed up once more as he stood upright with his hands behind his back. Keira and Faehorn followed him out of the room and into the hallway, only to be met with over thirty people that seemed to be waiting for them, most of them adventurers. They were lined up on either side of the hallway and wearing their respective guild uniforms. Among the familiar faces were Keira’s team members—Lola and Jules—as well as several other classmates and fellow adventurers she hadn’t seen in a while. The other former prisoners were naturally present, and even Fizzy was there for some reason.

“Legionnaire Keira Morgana of the 3rd Republic Legion’s 1st Scouting Battalion!”

Silus called out the catgirl’s full rank and name, causing her and the others to stiffen up and stand at attention. The redhead tracked Underwood with her eyes as he walked up to her and stared at her intently. She didn’t move a single muscle.

“For your exemplary service to the Republic,” he said in a clear, commanding tone, “for showing outstanding bravery and ability in the face of adversity, for going above and beyond the call of duty, for risking life and limb to safeguard the lives of your fellow countrymen, you are hereby awarded the Golden Crescent.”

The elf reached into his coat's inner pocket and took out a tiny black box. He opened it to reveal an award with a very literal name. It was an eight-centimeter-wide golden crescent. The medal was delicately engraved with various decorative patterns and the initials 'K. M.' clearly stamped in the middle of it. Silus deftly pinned it to the right breast of Keira's green tunic with the edges pointed upward, almost as if it were a smile. Once he finished, he stood aside while the others applauded and cheered in a rather disorderly manner.

Underwood waited for them to quiet down for several seconds before continuing.

"For your meritorious deeds, firm decision-making under pressure, and commendable strategic thinking, you are also hereby promoted to the rank of Decanus," he declared with a polite smile. "We expect great things from you, Miss Morgana. Now, take a good, long rest and report to my office first thing in the morning the day after tomorrow for your next assignment."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, sir!"

Keira gave a genuinely enthusiastic response as applause and congratulations poured down on her once more. Of course, Boxxy was happy. Granted, it wasn't quite sure what sort of significance this award had, but it was a uniquely shiny thing that made all that extra effort worth it. As for the Decanus thing, it simply meant Keira was now a non-commissioned officer in the Republic's military forces. It was roughly equivalent to the rank of Sergeant in the Imperial army, which gave her the authority to lead and command a squad of up to ten soldiers. Not the most glorious of assignments, but still a monumental achievement for a sixteen-year-old rookie.

"People!" Faehorn shouted, causing the noisy atmosphere to grind to a complete halt. "There's a time and place for celebration, you know!"

The others looked at each other with difficult expressions, as if someone just farted in their salad.

"Which, by the way, is thirty minutes from now, and in the mess hall. Drinks are on me!"

The cheers resumed as the gathered rabble dragged the hero off to celebrate. Faehorn watched them with a smile, while Silus maintained his serious expression. Once the rabble cleared off, the two veterans stepped back into the tiny, soundproofed interrogation room.

“She’s clean,” Silus immediately said. “Well, she probably feels sullied after what happened, but she seemed genuine enough.”

He’d lied through his teeth when he said Keira wasn’t under suspicion earlier, although the brief chat blew most of his worries away.

“That’s good,” Faehorn sighed with relief. “I’d hate to have to put her through any of the more… rigorous interrogation. Especially considering what she brought us.”

The plans Keira brought back were still undergoing analysis, but they clearly showed the Imperials’ aim to siege Fort Yimin within the week. This was much earlier than anticipated, and the forces they were sending were overwhelming.

“I just hope the poor kid isn’t traumatized by the end of all this,” said the worrywart of a Ranger.

“Indeed. Well, that’s why it’s important to let her and the others make happy memories while they can.”

Objectively speaking, their chances of holding the fort were next to nil. An ambush in the wilderness was one thing, but a siege was where soldiers had the definite edge over adventurers. The Empire’s military completely outclassed the Republic’s in every way that mattered, and the humans would bring quite a few powerful individuals of their own. At this point, the question wasn’t whether the 3rd Republic Legion could hold Fort Yimin, but how much damage they’d be able to inflict on the enemy before they fell.

“This Sandman character worries me, though,” Faehorn changed the subject. “Just how is he related to all this?”

“I can’t say. His motives, methods, and movements are all unclear at this point. However, like it or not, we do owe him.”

Silus reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a torn, wrinkled and slightly stained piece of paper.

“Literally,” he stressed while passing it to Faehorn.

“What’s this?”

“Something that was dropped off in front of the gates earlier today. It was nailed to the dismembered head of one Lord Hayhurst, former commander of the 8th Imperial Expeditionary Force.”

Faehorn took the piece of paper and looked at it with ever-widening eyes.

“Is this a joke?”

“Do I look like I’m laughing?”

The Ranger looked down at the note once again, both impressed and disgusted at the shamelessness of it all.

INVOICE

From: Sandman Assassinations Inc.
To: To whom it may concern, 3rd Republic Legion

Invoice #000001
For services rendered:
Imperial soldiers x 700 – 7,000 GP
Commanding officer x 1 – 1,000 GP
Next-day delivery – 300 GP
Subtotal: 8,300 GP
Boxing tax: 5%
Total: 8,715 GP

Payment terms: To be received within 5 days. Tell the red cat-eared beastkin to drop it off at the 600-year-old hylt tree south of the fort.

We appreciate your patronage and look forward to doing business with you again in due course.

Chapter Five
Making Connections

Part One

There was a sharp knock on the door to Silus Underwood's office. The man himself was already hard at work organizing the information from the stack of reports on his desk, despite it barely even being dawn. He hadn't slept the night before, though he certainly didn't let his fatigue show.

"Enter," he called out while scribbling on a document.

The door swung open and the newly-appointed junior officer walked in, announcing her presence with a salute.

"Decanus Keira Morgana, reporting as instructed, sir!"

It was an all-too-chipper voice that swept away the stale atmosphere of the messy office, making it the slightest bit more jovial. Her full-faced smile and gently swaying tail gave the impression of a person who had obtained true happiness. It was hard to believe this was that same frightened girl who seemed terrified of admitting she'd been allegedly violated just a few days ago.

"Ah yes, please have a seat, Decanus. I'll be with you in a moment."

The beastkin did as instructed and seated herself in the chair on the opposite end of the desk. Silus continued working on his estimate of the casualties should the Empire's impending siege of Fort Yimin go unhindered, but his mind was elsewhere. He stealthily appraised and observed the catgirl out of the corner of his eye, watching every tiny mannerism, twitch, and idle motion. The reason for this scrutiny was that, in Underwood's opinion, she seemed far too happy considering her circumstances.

Even though her behavior seemed odd and out of place at first glance, prior conversations with those close to her suggested this was actually normal for her. Her mood here at base supposedly swayed back and forth between gloomy and cheerful like a pendulum, to the point where one could call her volatile or unstable. Yet out in the field, she displayed a surprisingly serious and calculating demeanor. It was as if there were several different people living in that head of hers. Granted, it would be difficult to find an

adventurer who was ‘playing with a full deck of cards,’ as it were, but the near-total lack of animosity in her was noteworthy.

In fact, the only time she showed any genuine hostility was whenever the topic of the Empire’s military came up. She seemed to hold some sort of grudge towards them, but it was important to note this was limited to their soldiers. She had no issue communicating or working with any human adventurers that sided with the Republic, which spoke favorably of her character in Underwood’s personal opinion. Indiscriminately hating the many because of the actions of the few was the sort of thing that fanned the flames of this damned war to begin with.

As for the girl’s character, Silus was able to reach the painfully obvious conclusion that she was too easy to read. She didn’t hide her feelings and her thoughts floated onto her face without hesitation. There was already somewhat of a rumor within the barracks how bad of a gambler she was. Her bluffing skills were so bad that some of the soldiers actually felt bad for taking her wages whenever they played cards. At least three of them had gone on record stating that it felt like bullying, especially since the girl kept blaming her losses on her own inadequacies.

Long story short, Keira’s currently fluffy state of mind was most likely caused by something that had happened very recently.

“You seem to be in a good mood,” said Silus after putting away the report.

“Hm? Ah! Yes, uhm, that is, I just got a letter from home, you see.”

“Good news, I trust?”

“Hehehe, that’s one way to put it,” she declared with a goofy grin.

The letter was from an individual called Rowana Slyth. It had actually arrived the day before, but Underwood used his authority to delay its delivery to read it for himself. The colorful language made it clear that she and Keira were more than just ‘roommates,’ and honestly made the elf uncomfortable. Spying on his subordinates like that may have been a necessary thing in his line of work, but that didn’t mean he liked it.

At least the invasion of privacy had been helpful. Knowing that Keira was in a romantic relationship made it easy to understand why she hesitated to

speak of what transpired two nights ago. She was probably trying her best to purge the unpleasant memories from her mind. Well, that was possible in the literal sense with the help of a Psionic, but that was a rather extreme measure. Whether or not she actually visited those mental specialists Underwood mentioned during her debriefing was up to her, though it was unlikely she'd get the chance to while the war was going on.

It was unfortunate, but her mental health was a relatively minor thing when compared to the sort of issues Silus was currently struggling with.

"Now then, I must discuss a very sensitive matter with you. What I'm about to tell you is strictly on a need-to-know basis. You are not to speak of it to anyone outside this room unless I personally tell you to, understood?"

"Yes, sir."

Keira's giddy demeanor disappeared, replaced with a more serious one as she saluted while puffing out her chest. The sharp movement made her new medal glint pointedly. The Golden Crescent was a relatively common award given out to distinguished individuals and was ultimately nothing more than a fancy trinket, but she clearly wore it with pride. Silus, for his part, was glad she earnestly accepted the gesture for what it was

"What do you make of this, Decanus?"

Silus reached into a desk drawer and took out the invoice that he had received several hours before the catgirl's triumphant return and slid it across the desk. Keira picked it up and her expression went from surprised, to curious, to grim, then downright shocked as she scanned it top-to-bottom.

"This… Uhm… Is this a prank?" she asked with an incredulous voice.

"I said this was a serious matter, did I not?" he repeated sternly.

"Y-yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

Her initial reaction had been more or less the same as everyone else's who had seen that ridiculous scrap of paper, so Silus couldn't really fault her for it.

"But still, a prank? What makes you say that?"

"Well, even if you ask me that… I don't even know where to start. Sir."

“Then start at the first thing that caught your attention.”

“Yes, sir. Uhm, it feels weird for the Sandman to ask for money. Isn’t he an ally of justice?”

“You know that would technically make him our enemy, right?”

“Eh?”

“The Empire claims Teresa herself is on their side, you know.”

“Oh, right.”

Even if Teresa’s devoted most certainly took part in the war, whether the Goddess of Truth and Justice personally supported it was another question entirely. Mere mortals could not hope to comprehend the will of the Gods, but it was already public knowledge that Teresa’s Hero was slated to take part in the conflict was undeniable. That aside, the concept of ‘justice’ relied entirely on one’s perceptions and preconceptions. The virtue was a matter of perspective that could change at a moment’s notice. Silus was not a man who could trust in something as vague and fallible as that.

“To be frank, I’d be far more relaxed if this invoice was the real deal,” he admitted. “A motivation of wanting to make money is something I find easier to believe in than altruism.”

Of course, one needed to be wary of loyalty bought with coin. That wasn’t to say mercenaries and sell-swords were untrustworthy. It all depended on how professional they were, and whether or not they abandoned their contracts when it suited them. This was the kind of common sense the pragmatic Boxxy expected the elves’ higher-ups to employ. However, Keira was supposed to be a young, idealistic girl. Therefore, it made sure to show a troubled and uncomfortable expression at the elf’s words.

“So, then… this is the assignment you mentioned, sir?”

“That’s right. Although I do wonder why he singled you out. Do you have any idea why he would do that, Decanus?”

The shapeshifter had named itself courier so that it would know in advance what sort of funny business the elves would try to pull during the hand-off. It was also a question of whether they would pay willingly, but then it

would just take what it was ‘owed’ through brute force. Should that happen, the stingy elves would only have themselves to blame. Besides, even if they were short on military personnel, it wasn’t like the Republic’s coffers were light. The shapeshifter was quite sure they’d have no trouble preparing the request funds on short notice.

It obviously wasn’t going to admit that, so it prepared a few answers to the very obvious question the officer asked.

“Maybe he feels I won’t betray him?” Keira offered.

“And what makes you say that?”

“I do owe him my life, sir. Twice, actually.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

It was also not really a question as to how or why she caught the Sandman’s eye. Not only had the two met practically face-to-face back in Azurvale, but she stood out entirely too much. She was the only beastkin in the 3rd Legion, and her fiery-red hair, ears and tail demanded one’s attention. Even the opposing force had no trouble singling her out after her capture. Her ability and potential were also outstanding, as evidenced not only by her results, but by how Faehorn himself gave her special, almost preferential treatment. The last few days had more or less convinced Underwood her motivations to fend off the Empire’s invasion was no less genuine than his own.

It was her loyalty to the Republic itself that was still in question.

“What if I were to *order* you to betray him, though?” he proposed.

Her face once again became deeply troubled, showing she was unsure as to what to answer. As expected, she was conflicted. Although Silus was curious whether her gratitude towards her savior or her duty towards her country was stronger, this was not the time for such a pointless test.

“Relax, it was a hypothetical question. No offense, but I don’t expect an earnest person like you to be able to follow an order like that, even if you wanted to.”

“Uh, thank you?”

“In any event, get your gear and get ready to depart within the hour.”

“So, we’re actually going to hand over this much money? Just like that?”

Her reaction was understandable. Nearly nine thousand Gold Pieces was quite literally a fortune. It was the sort of lump sum that could potentially set one up for life, if it was invested wisely. Either that or it would at the very least allow an adventurer to retire a decade or two early.

“Heh,” Silus chuckled dryly. “Believe it or not, his rates are actually very generous. Waging war is quite expensive.”

Indeed, from a purely logistical standpoint, the average Imperial soldier was worth thirty to fifty times more than the ten GP this Sandman charged for each of them.

“Besides,” the officer continued, “it is my personal and official opinion that we want to establish good relations with this entity, which is why we’ll give him a little gift to go along with the payoff.”

“Understood, sir. Still, I feel uneasy carrying that much money by myself…”

“Who said you’re going by yourself?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing in the invoice said you had to go out there alone, so I’m sending you along with an armed escort, as well as one of our resident VIPs as insurance.”

Boxxy silently cursed its lack of foresight. This would complicate things, but it was fairly certain it could improvise something later. Right now, it needed to focus on the conversation.

“They’ll be there to back you up in case this is some sort of scam or trap,” Silus continued. “If that turns out to be the case, you are to abandon the money and retreat. The lives of my subordinates are more important than some coins and gems. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” the beastkin saluted.

“Very good. Now, do you have any questions?”

“Just one. What is this boxing tax supposed to be? Is this a real thing?”

Of course, the creature was aware of the answer. While the ‘reasonable rates’ were something it discussed with Snack, the ‘boxing tax’ had been suggested by Arms. Although she probably meant it as a bad joke, Boxxy liked the sound of it and added it anyway. However, it would be un-Keira-like if it didn’t ask about obvious things like this. Besides, it was genuinely curious how the elves would interpret it.

“I suppose that’s the shipping and handling charge,” Underwood said with a humorless smile.

“Shipping and handling, sir?”

“The invoice was delivered in a wooden box, along with the enemy commander’s severed head.”

“I see…”

Though it ordered Claws to deliver said head, this was the first it heard of it being packaged. Where and how did that stalker even find a box in the first place?

“Anything else?”

“Not at the moment, sir.”

“Good. This concludes your briefing. Dismissed, Decanus.”

“Yes, sir.”

Keira stood up with another salute and exited the office while Underwood went back to his duties. Half an hour later she was fully geared up and went to meet up with her armed escort—a platoon made up of fifty of the garrison’s veteran soldiers. One could easily tell them apart from the conscripted adventurers due to their gear. Although each individual wore something befitting their Job—light chainmail and padded armor for the scouts, thick cloaks and robes for the magic users, and metal-plated armor for the vanguards—they all had a uniform feel to it. Their matching appearance was primarily due to the predominantly silver-like color of their equipment and the eagle-wing-themed decorations and engravings along their shoulders and headgear.

Among them was the VIP that Underwood mentioned—someone that had Ranked Up from a regular elf into a high elf. She was an older woman, much like the various guild instructors, except that her face was still beautiful, elegant, and smooth with very few wrinkles. She had pure white skin that contrasted her long, raven-black hair and eyes. She was clothed in a luxurious black robe that seemed more like an evening gown than an adventurer's attire. It looked as if someone had cut out diamond-shaped holes out of the fabric, exposing her navel, collarbone, shoulders, the sides of her thighs and her upper back to the world. It was a high-class magic item without a doubt, but it also made it clear this woman put too much stock into appearances.

"Greetings, child," she said with a flourish of her arms. "Know that you are in the presence of Imiryl of the Maleficium. Fret not, for I shall guard your fragile existence without fail. All who seek to stand in our way shall be crushed under my heel!"

Her tone and attitude were condescending, to say the least. It was obvious she looked down on everyone around her as if they were dead weight. The soldiers around her merely rolled their eyes within their helmets, suggesting they were already familiar with her prideful behavior. Her arrogance was somewhat justified, however, as Boxxy had already caught wind of her reputation, and her apparent expertise with lightning magic. She could effortlessly trounce the shapeshifter if it revealed itself, so it had to make extra sure its act was flawless.

"Hi! I'm Keira! I'll be in your care!"

The woman called Imiryl was stunned silent by the catgirl's excessively casual tone.

"Wow, so you're a high elf like mister Faehorn, huh? I was expecting someone important-looking, but I didn't think you'd be this pretty!"

The woman just stared unblinkingly at the beastkin, almost as if she doubted whether the girl was an illusion of some sort. What sort of behavior was this? Was this whelp before her unable to grasp greatness when she saw it?

“I mean, between you and me,” the redhead lowered her voice, “he’s getting on in years a little, you know? I think his friend Lichter looks much better. Not that he’s my type or anything, but he’s quite handsome, isn’t he?”

Imiryl finally blinked, and then continued to do so rapidly as she struggled to wrap her head around the ever-shifting topic of conversation.

“So I heard you were like, a super famous Wizard, right? Say, you can shoot lightning of your eyes, right? Can you show me?! I always wanted to see someone shoot eye-lightning!”

The catgirl practically bounced in place with anticipation by this point, in stark contrast to Boxxy’s internalized panic. The chest-minded monster had no idea it would meet her face-to-face like this, so it had no other choice but to lay the act on thick. It didn’t even try to make friends with her, as there was no way this prideful snob would get along with someone as happy-go-lucky and bubbly as Keira. Staying in character at this point was more important than getting on Imiryl’s good side, especially since both Underwood and his superiors had their eye on the freshly promoted Decanus.

Besides, even if she was, by all accounts, a colossal bitch, the high elf Wizard was not the type of person that would vaporize someone just because they seemed rude and ignorant.

“Ahem!” one of the soldiers loudly cleared his throat. “Decanus Morgana, ma’am. I think it’s about time we set off.”

The beastkin was, technically speaking, in command of this little operation. The Sandman explicitly requested her presence, and she was one of the very few people to have met him. In short, this made Kiera the closest thing the Republic had to an expert on the masked figure. She also technically outranked the more senior Legionnaire who spoke to her, even if slightly. It was hardly a surprise that the man was as respectful to his superior officer as possible, as were his comrades.

That was only on the outside, of course. Inwardly they were all dreading having someone like Keira in command. It wasn’t because she was an adventurer, but because she seemed rather nutty. They were about to walk

into a potentially lethal confrontation with a dubious mercenary, and yet the girl acted as if she was getting ready for a casual picnic.

“Hm? Oh! Right, sorry. I just got a little over-excited meeting Miss Imiryl in person. I heard so much about her at the guild.”

“It’s understandable, ma’am, but we really should be on our way.”

“Yes, of course.”

The catgirl coughed once or twice to reign in her mock enthusiasm, then asked the soldier who addressed her earlier.

“Then, you have the package?”

“Right here, ma’am.”

The soldier gestured towards the man immediately behind him, who carried a sturdy-looking metal chest locked up with a heavy padlock.

“Very good,” she said. “Mister- I mean, Primus Underwood also mentioned a special gift of some kind. Where’s that?”

“I believe that is in Lady Imiryl’s possession, ma’am.”

Those words snapped the needlessly haughty high elf out of her stunned silence.

“Indeed, it is,” she declared in a grandiose fashion. “However, its identity is not for one of your stature to know.”

“Alright. Then let’s move out, everybody!”

Relieved to finally have some coherent orders, the soldiers assumed a loose, square-like formation with Keira, Imiryl, and the locked chest at the center, then moved out through the front gates. The hylt tree mentioned in the invoice was one of the oldest trees in the region and a well-known landmark. It was also a about twenty kilometers south of the fort, so the group would normally have a long march ahead of them if Imiryl wasn’t there.

Once the patrol was out of the front gates and a good three-hundred-or-so meters away from the fort, the high-Level Wizard started casting a grand Spell.

“Gate!”

A circular, magical doorway sprang out of thin-air, one that was almost as big as the fort’s main entrance. The scenery beyond the portal was that of a grassy plain, with an impossibly tall tree visible in the distance. One by one, the soldiers strode through the Gate as if it were an everyday occurrence. There was hardly any resistance, not even a peculiar sensation as Keira passed through it. It was as natural and effortless a transition as going from one room to the other. Imiryl, who was busy maintaining the portal, was the last one to go through before it collapsed in on itself.

All things said and done, they appeared a distance that was less than ten minutes away on foot from the tree. It was possible to transfer everyone directly under the tree’s canopy, but that might have been considered a hostile action by other party. As for why they had to step away from the fort, there was a powerful ward around the place that interfered with most forms of spatial magic. It was standard procedure to fortify a stronghold against teleportation, otherwise they ran the risk of the enemy transporting their forces directly inside the fort and bypassing the walls entirely.

This bit of trivia came as a surprise to Boxxy since Transfamiliar worked just fine within the fort’s confines. Then again, the laws of magic governing that particular Spell were different from those employed by a Wizard’s spatial manipulation, so it made sense in its own way. It was a very welcome discovery, because it meant that the shapeshifter held an edge in mobility its ‘allies’ might not anticipate.

The armed escort resumed their formation and approached the five-hundred-meter-tall tree warily. The Wizard deployed a transparent bubble around them, a barrier of some kind that would protect them from any incoming magical attacks. They raised their guard even further as they entered the shadow of the tree’s vast canopy, but there was still no sign of life. At least, not until they got within a dozen or so meters from the tree’s massive trunk.

“Who goes there?”

A woman’s voice rolled in from above, causing the soldiers as well as Imiryl to brace themselves for attack. However, nothing happened for the

next thirty seconds, nor did anyone raise their voice. At least not until one of the men gently ribbed a certain catgirl with his elbow, reminding her she was in charge.

“Uhm! Hello there! I’m Keira! I’m here to see Mister Sandman!”

“Do you have an appointment, or something?”

“Yes! We’re here to deliver payment for, uh, services rendered!”

“Ah, you must be the kitty I was told about. What of those angry looking men and that old hag? They your mates?”

“Old hag?” Imiryl muttered under her breath.

“Yeah! They’re my escort! They won’t attack, so, can I please speak to Mister Sandman?”

“I was told to permit you, and you alone! The others must leave my shadow if you wish for an audience!”

“Then, it’s okay if the others step back a bit, right? Okay, everyone, let’s-”

“Nonsense,” Imiryl stepped in. “I shall not let this poor child be taken in by such petty tricks. Show yourself!”

“I’m already in front of you, you old bat. Are your eyes just for decoration? Or do you perhaps need glasses in your old age?”

“De-spell!”

“No, wait!” Keira tried to stop the enraged elf, but it was too late.

An invisible wave of magic exploded out of the Wizard’s outstretched hand and washed over her surroundings. It was a Spell meant to negate ongoing magical effects by forcibly dispersing the mana holding them together. She expected to hit someone cloaked in Invisibility or hiding behind an illusion of some sort, but ended up with a completely different response.

“Oy! That hurt, you uppity cunt!”

A snake-like root sprouted out from the ground beneath her feet and delivered a splendid uppercut-like blow to the high elf’s chin, knocking her into the air. A countless number of other, smaller roots sprouted out from the grassy soil, firmly entangling the entire platoon and forcing them to the

ground before they could do anything. Only Imiryl managed to escape by flying up into the air with her magic.

A number of green vines shot out horizontally from the tree's thick trunk, firmly wrapping themselves around her hands, feet, mouth and throat. Not only was she unable to chant, but she immediately felt her MP drain away at a rapid pace. Those parasitic plants sucked her magical reserves completely dry within seconds and slammed her into the ground like a comatose fish. This left the pompous Wizard in the same helpless predicament as the others.

Having been singled out, the Wizard was dragged across the dirt until she was at the very foot of the hylt tree. It was then that the dryad residing within the venerable plant finally showed herself. The green-skinned woman walked out of the bark as if it were a curtain, causing everyone present to stare at her with wide open eyes. She was much younger than Ambrosia, so her proportions were not quite as voluptuous. In fact, her appearance was like someone in her late teens, much closer to Keira's modest proportions. She had the same hair-like vines growing out of her scalp as Ambrosia, although her lack of antlers was, according to the elder dryad, a sign that she had not matured fully.

The tempestuous tree spirit silently looked over everyone present before turning her attention to the 'uppity cunt' at her feet. She squatted down and glared at her with a look that could kill.

"Why the fuck did you just disperse the mana inside my trunk, you twat?!" she said in a clearly pissed-off tone. "I need that shit to live. Do you have any idea how painful that was? No, of course, you don't! You hoity-toity, smart-assed, stick-twirling, twinkle-fingers are all the same! You think you're all that just because you can conjure a few sparks? Well, guess what. You're not the top bitch 'round here. I am!"

The furious dryad took a few deep breaths as she let her tirade peter off.

"It's okay, though. I won't kill you. I'll just have to teach you a lesson."

A thick root jutted out from the soil behind her, and the dryad seated herself on top of it. She gestured at the vines binding Imiryl, which dragged the powerless Wizard closer to her and forcibly bent her over the dryad's knees.

A few extra vines rolled up the hem of her dress-looking-robe until her pale butt and lacy black underwear were visible to all.

“I shall now begin instructing you on the nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine reasons why you should respect your elders.”

The dryad then raised her hand and spread her palm wide.

“Number one.”

SLAP

“UMPF!”

She spanked Imiryl with all her might, making her rump jiggle furiously while its owner let out a muffled yell of pain.

“Two.”

SLAP

“GNNNN!”

One could see the shockwave of each hit travel down her thighs, almost as if someone had thrown a stone in the still waters of a pond.

“Three.”

SLAP

“UNGH!”

The dryad kept slapping her hard enough to leave a bright red handprint on the nearly snow-white skin of the elf’s buttocks.

“Four.”

SLAP

“GRMPH!”

To say it looked painful was an understatement, especially considering the tears streaming from the humiliated Wizard’s eyes.

“Five.”

SLAP

“RRRGH!”

And of course, watching this all unfold, were the fifty-odd members of Keira’s armed escort.

“Six.”

SLAP

“GRRRHR!”

The vast majority of them thought the arrogant bitch deserved it, as it wasn’t the first time her spoiled attitude had caused problems for them.

“Seven.”

SLAP

“HRRRHG!”

Still, there were some that felt bad for her, and that number only grew as the punishment dragged on.

“Eight.”

SLAP

“KHGR!”

As for Boxxy, who was still masquerading as Keira, it could only grumble internally at this development.

“Nine.”

SLAP

“HNNNG!”

These ‘nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine reasons to respect your elders’ was definitely *not* what it had in mind when it told Snack to teach that impressionable dryad how to use non-lethal force.

Part Two

It had been nearly forty minutes since the dryad started ‘educating’ Imiryl, and she was just about done by the sound of things.

“Nine hundred and ninety seven.”

SLAP

“HMMMMN!”

The Wizard’s face had long ago become a sopping mess, and her audience doubted whether that red palm-print would ever fade from her backside.

“Nine hundred and ninety eight.”

SLAP

“GRRRRGH!”

As for Boxxy, its only qualm about the situation was that it had to return the captive high elf safe and sound. It would’ve loved to try and absorb her body if that hadn’t been the case.

“Nine hundred and ninety nine.”

SLAP

“HNNNNNG!”

That should have been the dryad’s final lesson in ‘respecting the elderly,’ yet she seemed hesitant in letting her victim go.

“Ah, sod it! Might as well go for the big one thousand!”

SLAP

“GRNNN!”

With a final parting slap, she tossed the sobbing Imiryl aside like a filthy rag, released the platoon from their bindings, and calmly walked back inside her tree.

“Now then, all of you except the cat, get the fuck out of my sight!”

“Y-you heard the lady!” Keira stammered. “Everyone else, fall back!”

The soldiers gladly followed orders and moved away from the tree in an orderly fashion. A couple of them picked up the thoroughly humiliated high elf and carried her off. They would try and apply healing magic directly to her bruised bum, but many of them doubted whether she would be able to sit down anytime soon. It was almost a shame this mission was supposed to be a secret—they'd have one damn spectacular story to tell back at the barracks otherwise.

Once everyone except Keira was a good two hundred meters from the tree, they finally caught a glimpse of the so-called Sandman. A tall figure with a long, dark cloak wrapped around it dropped down from the canopy and landed with a dull thud on the grassy soil. He walked up to the clearly startled beastkin, who immediately bowed and squealed out an apology of some kind. The Sandman just stood there and nodded a few times, after which they apparently began a proper dialogue.

Or at least that's what her escorts assumed. Though the Rangers did their best to listen in on the conversation, the most they could make out was some barely audible voices and no actual words. They couldn't read lips with their superior sight, either, as one of them was masked and the other stood with her back towards them. This was, of course, entirely intentional, as Boxxy merely pretend to have a conversation with the fiend posing as its older ego.

Underneath that baggy cloak, messy bandages, and sloppy face-wrap was none other than Kora. She'd been instructed to break off her horns and tear off her extra pair of arms so as to fit inside the costume. The demon was currently pantomiming in accordance with her master's mental commands. She was unnaturally cooperative with this ruse, now that Boxxy thought about it. Its Demonology Skill then reminded it that a demon's horns were a rather important thing, and Arms losing hers had taken away much of her inherent aggression. This was normally a bad thing since 'aggression' was a fiend's main weapon, but it seemed to work out alright for this little play.

A few more minutes of this farce passed before the catgirl-shaped-monster turned to face the platoon in the distance and sent her second-in-command orders through Whisper Wind.

“One of you bring over the payment over, Mister Sandman wants to see it. Oh, and don’t forget miss Imiryl’s present too.”

The man looked towards the Wizard to find her curled up on the ground and hugging her knees in the fetal position. Even if her physical wounds were treated, the emotional scars would take a while before they healed. Still, she at least understood the whole thing was her own fault, so she complied with Keira’s request without a single word of complaint. She opened her Item Box, an Enchanter Skill that was nearly identical in function to Boxxy’s Storage, and took out a Masterwork-quality mithril rapier. It was a magic item she had personally enchanted and was no doubt the ‘gesture of goodwill’ that Silus Underwood had mentioned during the briefing.

The Legionnaire in charge of the money took it from her and brought it over to the duo under the tree along with the all-important metal chest full of gold. Keira met him partway, around thirty meters from the hylt tree. Her eyes grew so wide at the sight of the fancy weapon that they looked like they’d fall out of their sockets. That was an understandable reaction. The soldier who brought the weapon over on his belt was just as impressed.

To start with, the glistening white blade, intricately detailed spiral-shaped guard, and jewel-encrusted handle made it immensely beautiful, but it was no mere decoration. It was a light, graceful weapon that could be used for both thrusting and slashing attacks thanks to its magically-boosted sharpness. The other enchantments Imiryl had put on it were self-repair and increased durability, ensuring its edge remained as deadly as possible regardless of how much abuse its wielder put it through.

The beastkin took the valuables off the man’s hands with a nervous word of thanks. She made her way back to the Sandman while the elven soldier returned to his colleagues with a bitter smile. That sword was probably worth at least one and a half thousand gold pieces, meaning he just finished handing over a total of over ten thousand GP to a complete stranger. Then again, it was never *his* money to begin with, so he didn’t dwell on it. Besides, getting to see that lethal art piece up close was a treat in and of itself.

The elven Rangers kept watch from a distance as their redheaded commander unsteadily carried the heavy valuables over to the Sandman.

She set the chest down in front of him, unlocked it with the key and opened its lid. The Sandman peered into the steel lockbox for several tense seconds. Seemingly satisfied with the amount, the stranger gave a grand nod and shut the container with his armored boot.

However, when presented with the rapier, he clearly didn't want to accept it for some reason. Keira fidgeted around a bit and flailed her arms around in a panic, seemingly trying to convince him to take it. She seemed to succeed at first as the cloaked figure's massive hand reached out and picked up the comparatively tiny sword, but he then immediately handed it back to her. There was some more arm flailing and head shaking on the beastkin's part that did very little to help the situation. Eventually she was forced to take it back with her to the others while the Sandman picked up the chest. Some vines descended from the top of the tree and carried the tall figure off into the canopy, hiding him from sight. Again, that was mostly for show, as the gold in the chest had already been discreetly stashed away inside Boxxy's Storage.

Keira silently re-joined the platoon with a deeply troubled look on her face. The soldiers had been mostly quiet as well, as they didn't know what to make of the situation. They didn't particularly want to know, either. They weren't paid to do troublesome things like ask questions. If anything, since their current assignment was supposed to be kept a secret, keeping their mouths shut actually meant they were following orders. The only reason the Rangers kept an eye on things in the first place wasn't out of curiosity, but so that they could react in case things turned violent again. It was a good thing it didn't come to that, though. The distance between them and their target meant that the things they could have done to protect Keira in that situation could be accurately described as 'jack shit.'

So, with their duty fulfilled, they propped up the still-upset high elf Wizard so that she could open a Gate back to Fort Yimin's outskirts. Once they were back at base, Keira marched herself straight into Underwood's office. The elf was more than a little surprised to see her return with the mithril rapier on her belt, and asked for her report.

Keira explained everything since meeting up with her escort, up to the point where they were addressed by the mysterious voice and asked to leave.

Underwood let out an exasperated sigh when he heard Imiryl lost her cool and unleashed a wide-range De-spell.

“I knew I should’ve waited for Faehorn to return from his mission,” he muttered with his face in his palms.

Not only had Imiryl jeopardized the mission, but she had also ruined one of his plans. The intelligence officer had secretly ordered his people to put a tracking Spell on a bunch of those coins, but her rash actions had no doubt dispersed the temporary enchantment. It would have all been for naught, regardless. Boxxy had picked up on the oddity in the gold with its magical perception before the money had even left the fort. Claws was more than capable of ‘eating’ the tracking magic, if Imiryl hadn’t done it first.

“What happened next?” Silus asked.

“Well… the disembodied voice said something along the likes of, ‘That hurt!’ and then… we were caught.”

“Caught, you say?”

“Yes, sir. Roots came out of the ground, bound us and sucked up our MP. “

“All of you? Including Imiryl?”

“Yes, sir. It all happened so fast that none of us could offer any real resistance.”

“Was this the Sandman’s doing?”

“No, sir. It was that green woman that showed up.”

“Green woman?”

“Yeah, she walked out of the tree like it was nothing. She looked around my age, and had leaves covering her, uh, immodest areas. Oh, and her hair looked like a bush.”

“Strange. I’m sure there were no reports of such a person in the vicinity. Anything else you can tell me about her?”

“Uhm, Mister Sandman knew her. Seemed to be her boss, or maybe companion. Oh, he also said her name was Cyrilla, and that she was a dryad.”

“A dryad? Like the legends?”

“Legends, sir?”

The most Underwood, or anyone else for that matter, knew about dryads was that they were divine spirits that dwelled within hylt trees. There would sometimes be reported sightings of them here and there, but they were so extremely reclusive that very few people believed they were real. Even if they shared a world with ghosts, dragons, gods, demons, and all manner of other mythical beings, it was only natural to be skeptical of unfounded claims and old stories.

“Look them up for yourself later, Decanus.”

However, Silus didn’t particularly feel like explaining all that to the catgirl.

“Yes, sir.”

“So then, what did this dryad do?”

“She, uh, spanked Miss Imiryl.”

“Spanked?” the man repeated in disbelief.

“Yes, sir. Pulled up her robe, bent her over her knee and everything. She wasn’t holding back, either. Her butt shook with each hit, you know.”

“And the others can confirm this?”

“Yes, sir. We were pretty much forced to watch the whole thing.”

“I see… But why spanking, of all things?”

“I don’t know, sir. She called it ‘the nine-hundred-and-ninety-nine reasons why you should respect your elders,’ or something like that.”

Silus took a deep breath.

“She didn’t… *really* hit her that many times, right?”

“She actually went for the full thousand. Sir.”

“Sweet Nyrie…”

He pinched the bridge of his nose in exasperation. Humiliation like that would have turned that prideful woman into either a sobbing mess or a

furious typhoon of destruction. And it was obviously the former, judging from how Keira was still around to tell the tale. A strong-willed woman like that would bounce back in no time, but Silus couldn't help but feel partly responsible. The fact that Imiryl didn't know she might encounter a freaking *dryad* on this mission was technically Underwood's fault, even if he had no way of knowing that in advance.

"Alright, moving on. What happened afterwards? You said you spoke with the Sandman?"

"Yes, sir. The dryad released us from the roots and told everyone but me to leave. Mister Sandman showed up once the others pulled back. I apologized on miss Imiryl's behalf and thanked him for saving me."

"What was he like? His appearance, voice, mannerisms, anything you can tell me?"

"W-well, he's super tall, well over two meters. Couldn't see anything of him under that cloak and mask, other than those weird yellow eyes. No idea what the deal with those is, though."

"There's at least a dozen ways to produce that sort of effect, ranging from alchemy to enchanted eyewear. It's of no importance," Silus dismissed her concerns.

"Y-you sure, sir? It was super creepy," Keira insisted.

"That's the point, Decanus. It's psychological warfare. The same goes for his apparent height. It's most likely magically augmented, or he uses some other kind of trick to make himself appear more intimidating."

It was possible that was the man's natural size, of course. The giants of Percepeia typically stood three meters tall, so an offspring between them and an elf or human would theoretically have Sandman-like proportions. However, giants were quite rare and half-breeds with them were even rarer. It wasn't unprecedented or impossible for the masked vigilante to be one, just highly unlikely.

"What of his voice?" Silus questioned.

"In a word—manly," Keira firmly stated. "The sort of deep, smooth, unshakable tone you'd expect from Mister Faehorn if he were younger."

Underwood asked a few more questions regarding manner of speech, word choice, body language, and anything else that might tell him more of the Sandman's personality. Unfortunately for him, Keira claimed to have been far too stressed to watch for tiny details like those. She could only offer vague and unhelpful descriptors like 'scary,' 'serious,' and 'creepy.' Her commanding officer was forced to give up on this line of questioning and moved onto the next part of the debriefing.

"What of the payment?"

"Well, sir, he took the gold, but didn't want your gift."

The catgirl apologetically took the Masterwork rapier off her belt and set it on the table.

"I can see that. I'm asking why he rejected it."

"He said it was ill-suited to him, sir. And I think I agree. His hand was way too big to grip it. The handguard was in the way and everything."

"Hmm, so a practical man, huh? I expected him to accept it purely for its monetary value, but it seems he's not just some greedy fool."

"Er… you were testing him, sir?"

"Indeed, I was. Actions speak louder than words, Decanus, and the fact he didn't blindly pocket it is very promising indeed."

"O-oh…"

Boxxy had not considered this in the slightest. In fact, it had every intention of keeping the shiny weapon, albeit in a slightly different fashion.

"Decanus Morgana? What did you do?"

The way the catgirl shifted uncomfortably in her seat while her eyes desperately avoided Underwood's was more or less the same as holding up a giant, flashing 'GUILTY' sign above her head.

"I, uhm, I panicked," she admitted. "I said I was under orders to deliver it to him, and that I wouldn't leave until he took it. I immediately realized how stupid that was, but it convinced him to accept it."

"Then why is it here on my desk, Decanus?"

The beastkin did her best to avoid Silus' piercing gaze as she whispered her reply.

"He… gifted it… back… to… me…"

This was Boxxy's true intention. It wanted Keira to use this wonderful weapon. It was so incredibly shiny that it wanted to have it nearby at all times. That, and having the beastkin 'learn swordplay' was a perfect excuse to seek out a melee-oriented Job. There was a high probability the elves would just take the weapon back and lock it up somewhere, but it had some sound arguments prepared should that happen. After all, Sandman and Keira would most likely meet again, and the former would be very upset if he found out his gift was forcibly taken from its rightful owner. Something like that would surely put a damper on the good relations the gift was meant to secure.

However, Silus' reaction was outside the scope of Boxxy's expectations. He didn't scowl, sigh or get angry. Quite the opposite, in fact.

"Hah."

He laughed.

"Hahahahahahaha! Ahahahahahahaha!"

It was a full-blown, hearty laugh, probably the first one he'd had in a long time. A few tears even welled up in the corner of his eyes as he pounded on his desk with his fist. The troubled Keira had no idea how to react, so she just stood there with an uneasy look on her face.

"Hahaha! Haha… Haaaaaaah."

The intelligence officer calmed down a short while later with a long, drawn-out sigh.

"He read me," he said with a hint of admiration in his voice, staring off beyond the horizon.

No, you're definitely misunderstanding something, Boxxy retorted inside its head.

"He totally saw through me, didn't he?"

Definitely had no idea what you were up to.

“This is like he accepted our gratitude without taking our gifts!”

You can shove your gratitude up your ass. I just wanted the shiny things.

“I bet he even told you something like, ‘You need this more than I do’ or, ‘Use this to better protect yourself and those you love.’”

Nope, it was just an excuse to let Keira keep the shiny thing.

“He’s testing me in return, I know it!”

The only thing I want to test is your flavor.

“Something like, ‘Let’s see if you value your people or your things!’”

Things are more valuable than people though. Unless they’re shiny like Fizzy. Or tasty like Snack. Ah, but those technically aren’t ‘people.’

“Not to mention he has a dryad bound to his service!”

That’s mostly because she’s an idiot like her mother.

“This Sandman likely has a much keener mind than I originally assumed. I bet there’s a deeper intent behind every move he makes.”

No, see, the whole reason I’m doing this is to get you to pay me for eating tasty things.

“Have it his way, then. Decanus Morgana, you can keep that blade as a token of your benefactor’s goodwill.”

Okay, I like him. I’ll eat him last when the time comes.

“Use it with pride!”

Oh, right, time to get back into character!

“B-but, sir, I don’t even know how to use a sword!”

“Then you will learn,” Silus said matter-of-factly.

“B-b-b-but this is too much! I can’t possibly accept-”

“You will wield that blade and you will like it. This is an order, not a request, Decanus!”

“Yes, sir.”

Now that that particular matter was settled, Boxxy decided to put some distance between Keira and Sandman.

“Ah, sir, I almost forgot! He said to give you this.”

The catgirl dug around her pockets for a bit before bringing out a blue, cubic Comm-crystal.

“Oh, he left us with a way to contact him, huh?” the elf mused. “How very generous. There’s just one problem.”

The item’s inner-blue glow flickered pathetically like a candle in the breeze, a clear sign that its other half was out of reach. There was no mystery as to why that was. Silus recognized this model as a relatively cheap one that anyone could buy. It worked much the same way as the military-grade Comm-crystals his recon teams were issued, but only had about a tenth of the maximum range. Of course, it wouldn’t be able to reach the other one, which was presumably more than twenty kilometers away atop a dryad’s hylt tree.

In actuality the other Comm-crystal was ‘out of range’ because it was in Boxxy’s Storage, but Underwood’s concern was something else entirely.

“Decanus, did he give you a password?”

It was impossible to activate the item on their side without speaking the necessary keywords. They could respond to any communication attempts, but not initiate them.

“Er, no, he didn’t. Sir.”

“So that’s how it is, huh? ‘Don’t call us, we’ll call you.’ As expected, a careful individual.”

The man once again stared off into the distance as if he just saw a mountain he has to climb. This overly dramatic gesture caused Boxxy to silently label him as a moron who got needlessly motivated over unimportant things. A few moments later, Underwood turned his attention back to Keira.

“That will be all. Good work today, Decanus.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Also, I suggest you actually learn how to wield this,” he said, gesturing to the rapier on his desk. “Using it as just a decoration for your waist would be an insult to the weapon and its makers.”

The news that the Empire would siege the fort within the week had already circulated among the troops. Thankfully, the Sandman’s actions would likely set them back for several days, giving the Republic forces much-needed time to prepare. It wasn’t a lot of time, but more than enough for Keira to grasp the basics of swordplay. Knowledge and techniques that would otherwise take months could be learned in mere days through the miracle of Skills. The teenage girl wasn’t going to become a master swordswoman in a week, but she’d at least be able to put up a fight if someone cornered her.

“Yes, sir,” Keira saluted. “In that case, do you happen to know if miss Hilda is around?”

“I believe she’s out on patrol. She should be back within the hour.”

“Thank you, sir.”

She hesitated for a moment before picking up the weapon, then left the office with another salute. With her gone, Silus slumped back into his chair with a vague smile.

“The dwarven instructor from the Knights of Elena, huh?” he muttered.

He had intended to point Keira to one of his subordinates for training, but realized that would have been a poor decision. The man in question was a soldier first and a teacher second, which made him rather unsuited to be the beastkin’s instructor. Adventurers had to be taught by other adventurers, after all. Even if their Jobs were the same, their perspectives and frames of mind were completely different.

For instance, one was a disciplined, seasoned veteran who had more or less mastered the art of melee combat, while the other was a violent, swearing drunk of a woman with a penchant for needlessly breaking things.

“… Oh.”

And Silus had just sent an impressionable young girl with a known taste for explosives straight to that monster of a woman.

“I just hope the fort survives until the Empire gets here…”

Part Three

“Nope, not happenin’!”

Hilda’s response to Keira’s request for training was as negative as it was sudden, not to mention loud.

“Uh… Err… Huh?”

It surprised the redhead to the point where she couldn’t articulate words and instead only made stupid, confused noises.

“Ye can’t go demandin’ a new Job like that willy-nilly, ye silly git!” the elderly dwarf crossed her arms.

Okay, perhaps, ‘Hi, miss Hilda! Please teach me how to Warrior!’ was not the best way for Keira to frame her request. Especially not when she made it the instant she saw Hilda entered through the fort’s gates with her patrol.

“Er, that is, the training fee-”

“It ain’t about the gold, ye bloody fool!”

The two’s high-volume conversation attracted the bemused glares of many soldiers and adventurers alike. The gathering audience was something neither the dwarf nor her would-be disciple seemed to be conscious of. One of the spectators, a member of Hilda’s guild, judging by his blue Knights of Elena tunic, stepped in.

“Yo, Boss-Lady!” he called out to her. “You’re doing the thing again!”

“Huh?! Oh, right. Oy! One of you lot go grab Jessie and tell ‘er to come at the usual spot!” she shouted and someone ran off somewhere. “You there, kittyface, come with me!”

The fully-armored Hilda motioned for the catgirl to follow her to a slightly more private space. The two of them made their way through the space between the fort’s inner and outer walls and onto the large, flat training field next to one of the soldier’s barracks. They went over to a corner between the building and the fort’s wall, where Hilda finally took off her helmet. Her face was wrinkled, her hair was gray, and her skin was rough and craggy,

but her piercing green eyes held enough fiery vigor to make the undead want to willingly return to their graves.

“Alright, lassie, first of all, who are ye?”

“Ah, uhm! Decanus Keira Morgana of the 1st Scouting Battalion!” she answered with a salute.

“Ye been playin’ soldier a bit too much, methinks.”

“I’m Keira, an adventurer from the Hidden Arrow guild.”

“And don’t ye forget it! Ye need to have some self-respect for yer roots if ye don’t wanna lose yerself out there! Now then, ye’re one of Faehorn’s lot, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then ye should know full well Ranger and Warrior Jobs have terrible compatibility.”

Hilda was talking about how the two vocations were almost entirely mutually exclusive. Attributes, Skills, Martial Arts, weapons, armor—everything one Job demanded was useless for the other, and vice-versa. The roles they played both in and out of combat were also completely disparate. One could argue that a Warrior’s Iron Grip Skill could be used to apply part of one’s Strength (STR) Attribute to the damage of ranged attacks, but a single wheel does not a cart make.

“I do but, okay, I think I misspoke,” Keira explained “I want to learn how to use this effectively.”

She unsheathed the beautiful mithril rapier from her belt. Hilda wasn’t surprised in the slightest, as she’d pretty much guessed that was the cause of that ridiculous line she was greeted with upon the return. It wasn’t like the catgirl tried to hide it, and the dwarf already had a habit of picking out every sword, axe, dagger, spear and mace in her vicinity. It was sort of an occupational hazard.

“Yer conviction is lackin’, lass,” she said in a damning tone. “Ye don’t go around gettin’ a new Job just ‘cus you got yerself a new toy to play with.”

“No, but see, I’m no good when something gets up close to me. I mean I got claws and stuff, but that won’t work on trained soldiers… What I’m saying is, I’m not trying to master the sword. I just need to be proficient enough so that I’m not instantly dead if someone snuck up on me.”

“… Okay, that’s better. Ye’re still not cut out fer a Warrior, though. Ye’re better off learnin’ a Rogue’s trade.”

“That won’t help me take down opponents that come at me head on, though.”

That wasn’t entirely true, but Rogue Skills had too much overlap with what the Mimic Job was already capable of, and this seemed like a sound enough argument.

“Aight, fair ‘nuff. Still, ye don’t really need a Job if it’s just swordplay.”

It was an undeniable fact that the Sword Mastery Skill could be learned by anyone, even monsters.

“Miss Hilda, please stop testing me,” said Keira indignantly. “We both know a Mastery Skill by itself is meaningless.”

Even if one knew how to swing a sword around, it was hardly enough to qualify them as a competent swordsman. They’d get demolished instantly by someone who had the right Attributes and Skills to support their fighting style.

“Fine, fine!” the dwarf threw her hands in the air. “Leave it to that old shoe strap to get all the sharp ones,” she mumbled.

“Shoe strap?”

“Never mind that. Listen ‘ere, kitty-”

“Keira.”

“Keira, right. I appreciate yer enthusiasm and all that, but yer just not cut out fer it. Ye don’t have the right build, the right *foundation* to be a Warrior. Yer arms are like noodles and yer body’s too light.”

Even if anyone could become a strong Warrior in theory, some were far better suited than others. The Job required one to forge their own body into

a weapon, but the quality of said weapon varied greatly depending on the base material, so to speak. Yes, Attributes had the power to make one far more athletic than they had any right to be, but there were certain biological limitations they could not overcome. One such example was that a beastkin female would always be inferior to a human male when it came to muscle mass, endurance, and stamina. That difference would only grow wider as both individuals advanced as Warriors.

In short, Keira would need to be a massive tower of a woman like Lola if she hoped to go toe-to-toe with the Empire's footmen.

"Then, what about being a Berserker?" the redhead suggested.

"Same thing. Actually, that one's an even worse match for ye. Yer way too happy-go-lucky to work up the right sort of temperament one needs to really master the Job."

"I can get angry when I need to!"

"Do *not* lump a Berserker's unyielding rage with yer petty tantrums, child!"

The dwarf shouted with a voice dripping with bloodlust. It carried this supernatural weight around it that made one's blood freeze over. Although Hilda was a Warrior instructor, that didn't necessarily mean she was a Warrior herself. She simply knew everything there was to know about the Job. Her actual occupation was that of a Level 100 Berserker. An occupation that, as she demonstrated, came with a few quirks.

"It is fury that burns as bright as the sun, yet is also black as the darkest abyss. It rises up from the depths of our souls, tryin' to consume us, beggin' to bathe in the blood of those around us—friend and foe alike. In some ways, our worst enemy is ourselves."

Boxxy legitimately felt a degree of fear and pressure it hadn't experienced in a long time. This feeling was amplified tenfold in Keira's reaction as the catgirl shrank back from the terrifying dwarf, shivering and sweating profusely all the while.

"But we don't just let that side of us run wild. We *cannot* let it. So, we harness it, control it, nurture it, and direct it. It's a grim and violent path that muddles the line between men… and monsters."

The oppressive atmosphere slowly waned away as Hilda reigned in her boiling rage.

“Think ye can manage that, girlie.”

“N-n-n-n-no… ma’am…”

That was the truth from the bottom of the shapeshifter’s heart. Even if Boxxy knew anger, the sheer pit of malice it just saw brought new insights into Kora’s perpetually violent nature. Being a Berserker was something that ran far deeper than just a collection of self-destructive Skills.

“Aye, didn’t think so. Anyway, on the opposite end of the spectrum are Monks. But ye lack the sort of discipline and peace of mind to make good use of that, either. Being a Paladin is right out.”

“I- I see… So, I guess I’ll have to seek out a Rogue trainer after all…”

That wasn’t necessarily the case. The doppelganger could get what it wanted originally if it used a random disguise for long enough to obtain the Warrior Job as a fresh-faced recruit. The only issue was that this course of action would need to wait until Keira got back to Azurvale.

“That won’t be necessary, lassie.”

Hilda’s words threw its scheming mind completely off-track.

“Ye see, I had a feelin’ this is where we’d end up. Fortunately fer yer scrawny arse, I know a Job that’ll suit ye just fine!”

The dwarf turned her head to the side and beckoned over the woman who had been standing nearby like a sore thumb for the past while. She had auburn hair, brown eyes, a very slim figure, and wore extremely light armor bordering on plain clothes. She bore a large scar on her right cheek, and her otherwise plain face placed her somewhere in her early thirties. She was also human, which immediately prompted Boxxy to start releasing calming pheromones to counteract its Butcher of Humanity Perk. It didn’t seem to work too well though, as she still eyed the catgirl with a sharp glare. The shapeshifter silently wished for a way to turn that blasted effect off, but such a method was unlikely to miraculously appear out of thin air.

“This here’s Jessie. Ah, don’t mind that mean look of hers,” said Hilda. “She can’t help it.”

“Oh, so she’s actually nice once you get past it?” asked Keira hopefully.

“Nah. She’s still a massive cunt, but it’s best if you try and ignore it.”

“Watch your mouth, you old bat,” the woman growled. “I’ll rip your damned tongue out if you don’t.”

The dwarf rolled her eyes at the befuddled catgirl as if to say ‘case in point’ before turning her attention back to the matter at hand.

“Anyway, Jessie’s got an attitude problem, but she can give ye just the Job yer lookin’ fer.”

“Just so you know,” the woman glared at the catgirl even harder, “if you want training, you gotta pay up.”

“Ah! If it’s money, then-”

Keira reached for the coin pouch she had prepared in advance, but the woman snatched it out of her hands. She dumped the coins inside onto her palm, picked out a total of 200 GP and then haphazardly tossed the pouch at the catgirl’s feet.

“I appreciate your patronage,” she said with a rotten smile.

She had no idea just how close she was to getting herself killed. It had taken every last drop of Boxxy’s self-control to keep it from lashing out, ripping her arm off, beating her half to death with it, and then eating her still-twitching corpse whole. While it inwardly congratulated itself on not brutally murdering the woman, the dwarf moved in and punched her colleague in the gut, forcing her to keel over and drop the gold. Being struck by that heavy-looking metal glove was no different from being hit by a giant hammer, and it very nearly knocked the woman unconscious.

“Oy!” Hilda shouted at her. “None of that!”

She bent over, picked up the scattered gold and returned it all to Keira with an apologetic tone.

“Sorry ‘bout that. She’s a bit of a twat, but she’s still the only Blade Dancer trainer we have on hand at the moment.”

“Ah… thanks…. What’s a Blade Dancer, though?”

This was not a Job either Keira or Boxxy had heard of before.

“Well, it’s probably best if I show ye. C’mon, Jess, let’s have a little spar fer yer new disciple’s benefit!”

“Koff, koff!” the woman sputtered. “I’ll get you this time, ya old bat!”

Jessie scrambled to her feet while coughing profusely. She stabilized her breathing and pulled out one of the two swords on her left hip. It was a sabre—a type of one-handed sword with a long, thin, and slightly curved one-sided blade. It was quite similar to the rapier that started this whole thing, except that particular treasure of a weapon was straight, and more needle-like. Jessie assumed a one-handed stance with her right shoulder pointed forward and her left arm behind her hip. It almost looked classy, if not for the sour expression on her face.

“Adagio Variation.”

Her body glowed with a soft, blue light that gradually faded away after a few seconds while Hilda took one of the blunted training swords from a nearby weapons stand.

“Right then, come at me,” the dwarf beckoned.

Jessie lunged forward with a vicious stab aimed directly at the dwarf’s unarmored face, but was avoided with a tilt of her head. The human clicked her tongue and stepped abruptly to the right while swinging her sword diagonally, but her blow was effortlessly deflected by the dwarf’s sword. She kept making sudden, deliberate movements as she tried to poke holes in Hilda’s guard. Despite her best effort, all of Jessie’s attacks were effortlessly dodged or parried. The dwarf struck back with speed that matched the human’s, which was surprising given her stature. Then again, Boxxy was sure the ‘old bat’ was holding back quite a bit. This wouldn’t be a very good demonstration if the one showing off was knocked out in one hit, after all.

However, Hilda's attacks were still as sharp and deadly as Jessie's. The Blade Dancer avoided them with minimal movements, either by stepping back or to the side. It seems she didn't want to even try parrying or deflecting them with her weapon. This was probably a good idea since she'd likely be overpowered by her opponent's brute strength. She also tried to use the gap between Hilda's strikes to counter with a stab or slash, but those mostly just bounced harmlessly off of Hilda's thick armor.

"C'mon, Jess, this can hardly be called a demonstration," the dwarf called out in a bored tone. "Get a bit serious, will ye?"

No, she's already serious, Boxxy noted internally. *Seriously trying to kill you, that is.*

Each and every one of the Blade Dancer's attacks were aimed at vital areas such as the eyes, throat or the tiny gaps between Hilda's armor plates. Unlike her opponent, she gave it her all and didn't hold back in the slightest. Or at least, that's how it appeared at first, but the Blade Dancer stopped her feet abruptly at those provocative words.

"Alright, you asked for it."

It seems she was indeed holding herself back somewhat. Jessie lowered her stance into a far more relaxed one while drawing the second sword from her hip. It was a sabre, just like the first, only it seemed to be slightly shorter. She twisted her body around, positioning her left blade over her head and the right one parallel to her hip. She moved with such grace that it almost made her metal weapons seem like cloth ribbons.

"Presto Variation!"

Much like before, her body briefly glowed with a soft light. Only this time it was a green one. The exact effects of those Skills were unclear due to the weird words mixed in, but it was definitely a type of body strengthening technique.

"Dancing Swords!"

The next Skill she used caused transparent copies of her weapons to appear out of thin air. They floated around her unnaturally as if held by invisible strings, but were definitely guided by her will.

“Winterlich Waltz!”

At those two words, Jessie renewed her assault, but her movements were massively different from before. Rather than thrusts or short slashing motions, she made wide, grand swings as she twirled in and out of Hilda’s range. Her weapons left behind faint-blue trails as they swung through the air, and left a thin layer of frost whenever they collided with Hilda’s armor or training sword.

Her speed was noticeably higher, almost incomparable to before. It was at the level where Keira would normally see her as a blur that quite literally danced circles around her stationary opponent. Of course, the catgirl was anything but ‘normal’ and could easily track her movements, though she doubted whether she could move at those speeds. Even Hilda had trouble keeping up with them completely.

The Dancing Blades performed similar movements to their owner, forcing the dwarf to bring her large shield to bear in order to properly defend against the countless strikes coming at her from various angles. However, neither the floating blades nor the physical ones could get a clean hit on the veteran combatant. A few accurate swings of Hilda’s weapon quickly destroyed those flying annoyances, but it created a tiny opening for the Blade Dancer to launch her next attack.

“Blade Tornado!”

At Jesse’s words, both her blades abandoned their blue glow, and instead shone with the dull red light typical of most Martial Arts. The woman spun around on one leg like a human top, becoming a literal whirlwind of steel. Her attack let off a barrage of sparks and a chorus of screeches as her swords grinded against Hilda’s shield like a high-speed circular saw, though the dwarf didn’t seem to struggle in the slightest.

In fact, she found a gap and swung her sword down onto the spinning Jessie, who had to abandon her technique to dodge it by a hair’s breadth. The dwarf took a few more swings with her blade, but her opponent swayed gently like a blade of grass swaying against the wind. The unnatural movements seemed to ignore the way joints, momentum, and gravity normally worked and flowed into a sweeping strike at the sides of the

dwarf's knees. A nasty scraping noise rang out as her blade cut through the gap in Hilda's armor, though it drew no blood.

"Flamenco de Fuego!"

Jessie switched strategy again, changing her movements' rhythm and flow. She moved with rapid side-steps and made short, fast jabs and slashes at her opponent's face and joints with blades coated with a thin layer of fire. She came at the dwarf from various angles, constantly shifting her position. She seemed to finally be pushing past the veteran's iron-tight defenses.

"Rose Thorns!"

She overlapped whatever she was doing with another Martial Art. Her right hand launched a barrage of stabs, making it look like her blades had multiplied. A few of the thrusts successfully penetrated Hilda's guard, scratching her cheek and singing her hair slightly. This did not sit well with the shorter fighter.

"Shield Bash!"

The dwarf surged forward while swinging her shield arm. The mass of metal slammed into the Blade Dancer, interrupting her performance by sending her flying several meters through the air. She landed on the hard-packed ground, rolled over twice and ceased movement altogether. Well, she was probably alive since her chest was moving up and down, but she wouldn't be waking up anytime soon by the look of things.

"Phew," Hilda exhaled before turning to face the blank-faced beastkin. "Well, there ye have it, kit- I mean, Keira. As ye can see, Blade Dancers are a melee-oriented Job that relies on swift movement and pinpoint strikes rather than brute force."

The dwarf put away her training sword and patted down the singed and frosted parts of her gear before continuing.

"They also get some basic body reinforcement magic to use on themselves, and a number of other tricks to keep opponents on their toes. Those dances ye saw let them imbue their attack with various elemental effects. Well, they're kinda weak since a Dancer's INT is pretty low, but ye can still nail a monster's Bane or damage someone through their armor."

The dwarf glanced over to the still-unmoving Jessie and turned her attention back to Keira.

“Well, we got a bit of time before her Royal Twattiness wakes up, so I can answer any questions ye got fer me.”

“Are… Are you sure?” the redhead warily spoke up. “Shouldn’t we wait until she gets back up?”

“It’s fine,” the dwarf said dismissively. “I may not look it, but I know quite a bit about that prancing prat’s Job. She’s just here to give you the Job, I’ll be the one overseein’ yer actual training. Or at least as much as I can, what with the war business going on.”

“Oh. Then, uhm, what are Blade Dancers best at?”

“It depends on the individual, but generally speakin’ they’re at their strongest in one-on-one combat. They can deal with lots of small fries fairly easily, too. They can also use those stances—or ‘Variations’ as they’re called—to raise their speed even further, but their stamina and MP will disappear in a flash if they overdo it.”

“What about weaknesses?”

Besides being grossly out-Leveled by a dwarf Ranker, of course.

“Being outnumbered by opponents of relatively equal strength is bad. I mean, that’s normally the case for everyone, but Blade Dancers have it extra-rough, and something they normally avoid at all costs. Fightin’ stuff with long-range attacks or heavy armor also puts ‘em at a significant disadvantage, but ye can probably handle all that with yer Ranger tricks.”

“So one Job covers the other’s weak points! I see, I see!”

Mobility and precision were a Ranger’s strong points, but it was a Job that was almost entirely focused on projectile-based weaponry. Bows, crossbows, slingshots, throwing knives—that sort of thing. By themselves, they were almost completely defenseless in close quarters combat. It went without saying they’d lose instantly if caught by a Warrior, Rogue, or any other melee specialist. Avoiding those types of Jobs was easier said than done, because they all had ways of closing the gap between them and their target. Lola, for example, could use a Skill that launched a harpoon-like

projectile made with magic, which could be used to pull her and her target closer together if it hit.

In other words, ‘I will be fine if I don’t get hit’ was a foolish sentiment among adventurers and monsters alike. Therefore, having a melee-oriented Job that was highly compatible with a Ranger’s natural strengths made for a very attractive proposition. Blade Dancer was more or less perfect for Keira. In fact, it was actually better suited to her than Ranger given the shapeshifter’s experience with close-quarters combat. It might have even picked this Job for its alter ego in the first place if it had known about it at the time. Unfortunately, even Boxxy recognized the catgirl’s apparent build was ill-suited to being a Warrior, so it hadn’t even bothered to ask the Knights of Elena. There was no telling how long it would have remained ignorant to Blade Dancer’s existence if it hadn’t decided to ask Hilda for advice. As expected, the insight and knowledge of one who has lived a long time was a tasty resource to have.

There were still a few nagging thoughts regarding that Job, though.

“How come I’ve never seen a Blade Dancer around before?”

The monster was quite sure it would remember them if it came across them. Of course, trying to remember each and every person it killed was like counting the number of breaths it had taken, but it was sure a fighting style like Jessie’s would stand out in its memory.

“Dunno,” said Hilda with a shrug. “It’s not like it’s a weak Job or anythin’ like that, but it never really caught on ‘round these parts. Maybe it’s a culture thing or a race thing, but I just think that very few people around Azurvale have the natural aptitude fer it. Dwarves like me are right out. It’s pretty popular among yer kind to the far east, though. There’s a good chance yer compatibility with it is good.”

“Ah, so that’s how it was,” the redhead nodded.

“Anything else on yer mind?”

“Yeah. Was this spar really necessary?”

The dwarf obviously knew the ins and outs of the Job, and her words explained it much better than her actions. This entire demonstration was

rather pointless in retrospect. It just seemed like harassment or bullying.

“Nah, not really,” the dwarf admitted. “It was mostly an excuse to smack that twat about a bit.”

“I… see…”

So, it was bullying after all. Boxxy quickly filed Hilda under its ‘Impressively Violent’ mental category and proceeded with its final decision.

“Then, I want to try being a Blade Dancer.”

“Good choice. Well, I think it’s a bit early fer yer second Job, but time isn’t a luxury we have right now, aye?”

“Well, technically it’s my third Job…”

“Huh?”

“Yeah, I got the Artificer Job like two weeks ago from a friend.”

“Ohhhh! So *you’re* that Merry Popper I’ve be hearin’ about!” Hilda joyfully exclaimed.

“Merry Popper?”

“Aye! The wee lass that blows shit up with a smile on her face! That’s you, ain’t it?!”

“…”

It would seem Keira had already gotten somewhat of a questionable reputation around the fort. It was an undeniable truth she spent a lot of her spare time making and testing various explosives with Fizzy’s help, but it was hardly worthy of such a nickname, was it?

“Actually, this is a good opportunity,” Hilda lowered her voice to a more conspiratorial tone. “Ye think ye and yer mate could hook me up with an exploding hammer?”

“I, err, what?”

“Ye know, just something that goes ‘boom’ when ye swing it just right, yeh?”

“Well, uh, that, I mean, it’s probably possible. But you’d get caught up in it too, you know?”

Even Boxxy was especially careful with bombs and grenades. Metal shrapnel had a habit of flying unpredictably far, not to mention it ricocheted off hard surfaces such as rocks and shields. It didn’t matter how high her Level was, not even Hilda would get away unscathed from a point-blank explosion like that.

“I know! That’s what makes it fun!”

For the briefest moment, Boxxy felt something that might be called a genuine pang of sympathy for Faehorn. Regardless of their species or motives, that elf still said some useful hints that Boxxy could genuinely learn from. It suddenly made sense why he never got along fully with this woman, despite being decades-long adventuring companions.

Well, none of that was really a reason to deny her. In fact, Keira had nothing to lose from getting on her good side.

“T-then, uhm, as long as you pay for the materials-”

“Nice one, lass!”

The dwarf cheered and heavily slapped the catgirl on the back.

[You have suffered minor blunt force trauma. HP -29.]

“Geh!”

“Oops, sorry ‘bout that! Got a bit too excited!”

‘A bit too excited’ she says, Boxxy internalized its discomfort. *That strike was strong enough to turn most house pets and even some bottom-tier monsters into paste!*

“Anyway, just send the list of stuff over to me later and I’ll take care of it!”

“S-sure thing, miss Hilda.”

“While we’re at it, think I can get a matching exploding helmet? You know, to give some real ‘Oomph!’ to my headbutts?”

It was at that moment that Boxxy escalated its internal classification of Hilda from ‘Impressively Violent’ to ‘Batshit Crazy.’

Part Four

A pack of gnolls were busy digging into a trio of deer carcasses, the result of a particularly successful hunt. The camp was shoddy at best. They had only cleared up enough space to lay their heads and make a firepit. They hadn't put up any huts or tents, so the only thing separating their sleeping space from the rest of the forest was trampled-down grass and the faint scent of urine they used to mark their territory.

However, their lack of shelter was due to their relatively low intelligence. Although not quite on the level of enlightened races, gnolls were at the very least still smarter than goblins. Of course, they knew full well how to protect themselves from the elements. Otherwise their species would have long ago been wiped out by the harsh winters that plagued the lands of the elf-dominated Ishigar Republic. Although many monsters and animals hibernated during the frigid winter, gnolls remained active. They survived the numerous snowstorms and freezing temperatures by huddling up in small villages that consisted of burrows and wooden huts while subsiding on smoked meat and dried fruit.

Which was why anyone that knew enough about the beasts would wonder about this particular pack's actions. Gnolls were not particularly big eaters, so the game they caught was more than enough to sate the hunger of the two-dozen individuals. Normally, they would eat only as much as necessary and then preserve the leftovers for the coming winter.

Yet, the canine humanoids gorged themselves frantically, showing no signs of stopping as meat, guts and bones were crunched and swallowed without any hesitation or thoughts as to their long-term survival. Although reading their snouted, hyena-like faces was impossible, one would still get the distinct impression that these things ate like there was no tomorrow. This hypothetical observer would be right, because in all likelihood, these individuals would not see another dawn.

An arrow flew silently out of the tree line, boring straight through one of the creatures' skulls and pinning his corpse to his comrade's shoulder. The injured gnoll let out a yelp in pain and shock as three more projectiles

followed, reducing the total number of gnolls down to twenty in an instant. The biggest and burliest of them, who also had the best stolen gear of the lot, let out a howl and rallied the others. They all reached for their rusty spears, dulled swords, and crude clubs. Once armed, they huddled together in a tight circle while facing outward. They took long, deep breaths and patiently waited for Death to come and claim them, much like it had the rest of their tribe.

Originally, these gnolls had been part of a village. Theirs had been one of the bigger settlements in vicinity of Fort Yimin, although mostly because there was a good deal of distance between the two. The gnolls had long ago learned not to tread near the fortress, and instead expanded their territory in the opposite direction. As a result of their chief's unnaturally wise decision, the tribe flourished, and their numbers doubled to about two hundred adults and thirty pups over the course of a few years.

That all changed two days ago, when *that* came. A sole female adventurer attacked their village head-on for seemingly no reason. Not that the creatures cared. Gnolls often attacked everything outside their own tribe on sight, and did not hesitate to mobilize against the intruder. They thought they would just crush the beastkin and turn her into jerky, but they had no idea as to the sheer terror that lie dormant in that small frame.

That killed over half of them within the first half hour. Fighters, farmers, children—it didn't matter who or what, all were sliced up and devoured on the spot. Then, for some inexplicable reason, *that* disappeared into thin air as if it were a bad dream, right as *that* was skewering one of them on its sword. The surviving gnolls all gathered up and made a decision. They would abandon the settlement and move further north. *That* would definitely return to finish the job. Not one of the remaining gnolls believed otherwise. They took what food and weapons they could carry and ran off into the wilderness without a second thought.

They had the right idea, but their execution of it hadn't been fast enough. No less than six hours later, *that* was already hot on their trail. The remaining ninety-or-so gnolls desperately fought back as they ran for their lives. They split up, set crude traps, even resorted to poisoning their young and feeding them to *that*, but none of it slowed it down in the slightest.

Little by little, bit by bit, they were all hunted down and slain. These twenty were likely the last survivors, and that would not last long. None of them doubted the identity of their attacker. After all, the ones that died moments ago were their only remaining Druids and Shamans. *That*, the thing that looked like a girl, always made a point of taking out the rare magic users among them first.

Just as expected, *that* strode confidently out of the woods, and all the gnolls silently stared at the approaching horror. Crimson hair like a rampaging forest fire. Piercing yellow eyes that barely registered them as sentient beings. A pearly-white, crescent-like grin plastered on its face. A naked, slender body unburdened by foolish things like clothes or armor. A furry red tail that swished playfully behind like a reaper's scythe.

That bore the appearance of a young and feeble human-like girl however one looked at it. While not immediately threatening, the horrific gap between its appearance and its strength only made *that* that more terrifying. Those tiny arms had literally punched down the walls of their village. Those small teeth could crunch up their skulls and bones as if they were dried leaves. Those frail-looking legs carried it with a speed too fast for any of them to follow. That soft skin that allowed no blade, arrow, or Spell to leave a lasting injury on.

That was an opponent all of them knew just enough of to understand they were no match. They knew it would come, that their comrades' diversions were pointless and merely delayed the inevitable. Their fight-or-flight instincts had long ago given up, as neither option would save them. Their time was at an end, and so they put all their remaining strength into enjoying what had undoubtedly been their last meal.

The girl-shaped thing drew a long, white blade seemingly out of thin air. It gripped it in its right hand and assumed a sideways stance with its left arm behind its back and her right shoulder forward.

"Adagio Variation," it mumbled in a sickeningly sweet voice.

The catgirl-shaped monster kicked the ground, crossing the distance between itself and its prey in an instant. The rapier pierced clean through the skull of the biggest one, who seemed to be in charge. The others swung

their weapons in desperation, but every single one of them was avoided with minimal effort. They knew attacking would have been pointless even if they lopped the thing's head off, but there did not exist a single monster on this world that would go down without putting up a fight when cornered.

The girl-thing struck out with its left hand, its slender claw-tipped fingers digging into the nape of a gnoll's neck as if they were pins inserted into a cushion. It withdrew them a moment later, and did the same to two more. The three gnolls howled in rage, and then swung out at their own comrades, cutting them down in cold blood as the catgirl's mithril rapier pierced skull after skull.

"Winterlich Waltz."

At her second utterance, that shining blade stained with blood gave off an eerie blue light, and the surrounding temperature started dropping in the next instant. She swung it about in grand, slashing arcs, encasing everything she hit in a thick layer of ice and turning her prey into gnollcicles, one after the other. Even the ones that turned on their own kin were slaughtered indiscriminately. All said and done, it took but a minute to turn all the remaining gnolls into naught but shards of ice.

Well, except for the first one that Boxxy had hit with its newly-acquired Blade Dancer Skill. That one had quite literally exploded into gold coins. And the reason for that was clearly visible in the string of lingering messages inside the Mimic's mind.

[Proficiency level increased. Hornet Style is now Level 4. STR +2. AGI +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Puppet Parasite is now Level 4. INT+2. CHR +2.]
[Proficiency level increased. Adagio Variation is now Level 3. DEX +2. AGI+2.]
[Chaotic energies swirl around you. The next thing you kill will explode into a shower of gold.]
[Proficiency level increased. Winterlich Waltz is now Level 2. AGI +2. INT +2.]
[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 16 Blade Dancer! DEX +2. END +2.

STR +1. AGI +1.]
[Proficiency level increased. Winterlich Waltz is now Level 3. AGI +2. INT +2.]

“Ahhh, hahahahahaha!”

The shapeshifter let out a laugh of one clearly drunk on power. Its newly-acquired Job and related Skills were developing at a mind-boggling pace. How long had it been since Boxxy experienced rapid growth like this? It was so delicious that it almost forgot itself.

“Ahahah! Ahah…. Ahem.”

The monster reigned in its enthusiasm. It had to be careful not to be found out, even if there was a million-to-one chance someone from the fort might see it like this. Well, getting sixteen Levels of a new Job within four days would probably turn quite a few heads, but it’s next guild-mandated Full Appraisal wasn’t for another two months. It would be quite some time before it was at any real danger of someone questioning Keira’s abnormal Level progression, but that moment would surely come. Even if Essence Concealment had a way of toning down the apparent Level of General Skills, Jobs were far more binary. They and their related Skills could be either shown or hidden, and that was it. This was an odd distinction, but that was just how things were. At the very least, it wouldn’t have to explain how it obtained such a high Level of Sword Mastery in so little time. Honestly speaking though, being able to completely hide the fact it was a doppelganger was all the shapeshifter really wanted out of the Skill. Everything else was an added bonus so long as it had access to Job trainers.

Indeed, having a proper Job to support its swordplay really made a huge amount of difference. The Hornet Style Skill it learned as a Level 5 Blade Dancer gave it the ability to use the same bizarre-yet-effective one-handed fighting style Jessie had demonstrated during her spar. Adagio Variation, on the other hand, was less like a stance, as Hilda had described it, and more of a physical boost that assisted Keira’s movements. And last but not least, there was Winterlich Waltz. It was an odd Skill halfway between a Spell and a Martial Art. It evoked Caster-like magical effects through continuous motion rather than chanting. Unlike Jessie, however, Keira had enough INT to make the ability quite devastating.

Of course, the creature hadn't neglected its monster Skills, either. Using Puppet Parasite in humanoid form was a bit tricky, but the monster forced itself to learn how to do it. It would be fighting a lot more in Keira's body, and needed to practice employing its various abilities with speed and subtlety. That and many Blade Dancer Skills required a more 'standard' arrangement of limbs. Winterlich Waltz, for instance, was impossible to use unless one had exactly two feet and two arms. Even Hornet Style was tricky to use properly with tentacles, but the passive boost it gave to sword damage was quite tasty all the same.

That said, the boon couldn't compare to Boxxy having its Chaotic Disposition actually produce a favorable result for once. The shapeshifter half-expected the coins it had produced to fade away with time. It wasn't as if the gnoll turned into gold, but more like the coins burst out of its skull as if they had always been there. Meaning they were likely conjured out of thin air and would disappear into nothingness with time. Even if that weren't the case, there was no merchant out there that would consider them legal tender.

In fact, it was more accurate to call these things 'chips' than 'coins.' Each was blank on both sides, lacking the crests or portraits of dead guys that governments typically carved into minted currency. The relative size and weight would put each chip's value somewhere around eighteen gold pieces, but no such denomination existed in either the Empire or the Republic. Or anywhere else, for that matter.

Most nations on the continent of Atica complied with a series of ancient regulations known collectively as the Gold Standard Concordat. These had been put in place over a millennium ago by Mortimer, the God of Death and Commerce, presumably as a means of ensuring profitable trade between the various enlightened cultures. As a result, the various nations used functionally identical currency. A King Piece coin, for instance, had the same weight, composition, dimensions, and monetary worth of 50 GP regardless of which nation minted it. There was nothing keeping merchants and shopkeepers from accepting foreign currency other than their political views and beliefs.

It was therefore highly unlikely anyone would accept the freshly conjured almost-coins Boxxy gleefully stuffed into its Storage, but the shapeshifter didn't care. It actually preferred them over real money, since the perfectly flat and smooth edges made the blank coins that much shinier. It understood they'd likely disappear, but Boxxy wouldn't be Boxxy if it let such curious shinies wallow in the dirt unappreciated. There was still joy to be found in the at the acts of picking them up, carefully cleaning them, and safely depositing them in its pocket dimension one by one.

If nothing else, this was a much more enjoyable instance of Chaotic Disposition than the one that had triggered during its first assault on the gnolls. Being suddenly transported twenty meters in a random direction was something it had experienced a few times before, but getting teleported twenty *kilometers*? It shuddered to think what would have happened if the spot it appeared in was straight up in the air, or deep underground. It had been inwardly cursing Jedediah, the Goddess of Chaos, for forcing this infuriating ability onto it, but this literal jackpot had somewhat improved Boxxy's opinion of Chaotic Disposition.

Having finished collecting the temporary boon to its ever-growing hoard, the shapeshifter reverted to its favorite chest-bound shape, and proceeded to eat up the gnoll's remnants. Unlike before, it could leisurely savor the flavor, so it was in no rush to scarf them down. Their flesh was a bit stringy, but definitely on the tasty side. The frozen ones were even better than normal, as their iced-over flesh and bone was really crunchy and fun to chew on.

Stuffing so many icy bits into its maw so quickly proved to be a bad decision when Boxxy suddenly felt a shooting pain run up the back of its throat and spread across the top of its lid. Its immediate thought was that it had eaten a poisoned gnoll again, but a quick consultation with Snack revealed this was not the case. Apparently, the creature had just experienced something called a 'brain freeze.' Boxxy immediately began to panic, but its faithful familiar was quick to assure her master that the term was very much metaphorical.

All of that settled, the criminally ignorant shapeshifter thought on its next course of action.

Now then, I should probably head back.

This pack of gnolls were the last ones in the area, and the length of Keira's solo hunting trips were starting to push the boundaries of what was acceptable within the Republic's armed forces during times of war. Pretty soon she would get almost no free time, which was partly why Boxxy was so adamant about getting as many Levels as possible within a short time frame. At the very least its educated guess was spot on, and the vast majority of the XP it got from killing things with swords went towards its Blade Dancer Job.

This would definitely need to be the very last occupation Boxxy picked up in the foreseeable future. It was common knowledge among adventurers that an individual with one Job at Level 100 was infinitely more terrifying than someone who had five at Level 20, and Boxxy was already splitting its focus too much. The shapeshifter was a Warlock while Spell-slinging, an Artificer while tinkering, a Blade Dancer while swinging a sword around, a Ranger while shooting at things with a bow, and a doppelganger at all times.

Oh right, its Ranger Job had hit Level 30 along the way. Boxxy was so enthralled with killing things, it almost forgot about it. Now that it was free from Faehorn's nagging, it could freely pick the Skills it wanted, and it almost immediately chose one it heard much about.

[Hunter's Mark]
A good hunter never loses sight of their quarry.
Requirements: Level 30 Ranger, 200 PER
Type: Active
Activation Time: Instant
Cost: 130 MP
Range: 200 Meters
[Effects]
Tracks the target's location for the next 30 minutes.
Targets afflicted with Hunter's Mark take additional damage from projectile-based weaponry equal to 2% per Level of this Skill.
Increases the range and duration of this Skill by 20% per Level of this Skill.

It was a Skill that could be called the natural enemy of Rogues, Spies and any other Job that relied on stealth or invisibility. An unwitting target could get ‘tagged’ at a distance without realizing it, at which point the Ranger could tell their exact location regardless of how sneaky they were. Even if they realized they were marked by tracking magic, they’d need a Wizard’s De-spell or a Paladin or Priest to Cleanse them of the effect. The extra potency of ranged attacks was nothing to scoff at either. Lastly, the Skill would certainly prove useful once Boxxy grew strong enough to seek vengeance on Edward, making this a no-brainer.

[Proficiency level increased. Hunter’s Mark is now Level 1. INT +2. WIS +2. PER +2.]

That said, Boxxy already had a more immediate use for it in mind. Underwood’s intelligence gathering had determined that no less than six Imperials with Level 100 Jobs would be present at the upcoming siege. Hunter’s Mark would make it easier for the shapeshifter to track and avoid these VIPs. Boxxy had serious doubts it could survive any of them, even if it didn’t have to maintain its cover as Keira.

Reaching Level 100 in a Job did more than allow enlightened to Rank Up. It gave them access to a unique and extremely powerful Ultimate Skill. Faehorn’s was something called Turret Stance, which allowed him to fire arrows with a truly unbelievable rate of fire so long as he stood still. Hilda’s Ultimate was Tempest of Wrath, which unleashed her inner rage to bolster allies while hindering enemies. Boxxy didn’t know the exact effects and conditions of either Skill, but that was expected.

The only reason the ex-mimic knew about those two was because it had gotten close to them as Keira, but adventurers normally kept the details about their trump cards as secret as possible. It wasn’t far-fetched to say that the tide of a battle between two armies could easily sway depending on how effectively each side utilized the Ultimate Skills at their disposal. In a situation where the Empire fielded six such people while the Republic only had three, the latter would almost always lose. This would be the case even if the defenders had a large advantage in troop strength, which they most certainly didn’t.

In short, the Republic's defeat was more or less a certainty. Even knowing that, simply giving up Fort Yimin and the surrounding region without a fight was even worse in the long run. The elves had no choice but to make a stand. They were in a desperate situation, and if Boxxy learned anything from its days at the Mercenary Guild in Erosa, it was that desperate people made for excellent clients. Hence why 'Mister Sandman' had offered the 3rd Legion's leadership a plan that just might tip the scales in their favor. It didn't really care whether they won or lost, it just wanted to secure as much profit as possible.

Fort Yimin's commanding officers naturally frowned at the vigilante's profiteering behavior, but they ultimately accepted the deal. In fact, it was just about time for Boxxy to collect its down payment, so it wasted no time getting back to base. A quick cast of Transfamiliar caused it to swap places with Claws, who was about sixty kilometers away. This distance was around the limit of Boxxy's current MP. Transfamiliar, like other spatial relocation magic, grew in cost directly proportional to the distance traveled. In other words, as long as Boxxy's MP grew, so too would the distance it could cover in a single use of the Spell.

Right now, however, it was still several kilometers away from Fort Yimin, inside a secluded cave covered in Claws' webs. It quickly assumed Keira's form and took her gear out of Storage. It could have worn it during the gnoll hunt, but that would have left some very conspicuous stains and holes in her outfit. Not the sort of condition one would expect it to be after what was supposed to be a light hunt.

Once Keira was properly dressed, she strode out of the cave and ran on all fours back to the fort. She returned to base in the early afternoon, and was almost immediately sent out again. The redhead was escorted by the same platoon of soldiers as last time, including another chest heavy with treasure. A gnomish Wizard—one of Imiryl's disciples—handled the Gate Spell that transported the group from the outskirts of the fort to the vicinity of Cyrilla's tree.

This time the armed soldiers let Keira carry the heavy chest to the dryad's resting spot all by herself right from the start. Although the embarrassment this particular bunch suffered at her hands was not made public, none of

them were keen to repeat it. Imiryl herself had suffered the worst of it, so none were surprised to hear she refused to ever get near that tree again. There was also the matter that news of her spanking had somehow spread throughout the fort, and many believed the outlandish tale. The infamously snobbish high elf showed far too much modesty and reservation as of late for that scandalous rumor to *not* be true.

That aside, the beastkin's escorts couldn't help but feel their mission had changed. Since the Sandman had apparently proven himself trustworthy, the purpose of their presence most likely to ensure a third party didn't show up and ruin the transaction. So, the Rangers in the platoon focused their attention on the surrounding plains, and only one of them watched the beastkin carry the payment of five thousand GP off to the tree. She wobbled unsteadily for the latter half of the short walk due to the sheer weight of the gold in that chest, but she made it to the base of the ancient tree without incident.

Just like before, a cloaked figure they could only assume was the Sandman dropped down from above. He checked on the contents of the chest, and then handed something small to Keira, which she immediately stowed in a pouch on her belt. She then took out the beautiful mithril rapier on her waist, gave it a few demonstrative swishes and bowed to the Sandman, presumably in thanks. Leaving the chest behind, she walked back to the rest of the platoon, at which point the Wizard took them all back to base. All things said and done, the whole transaction had taken no more than ten minutes.

Once they were back at the fort, Keira immediately reported to Underwood's stuffy office, as the man had become her direct superior at this point. Technically he was her boss's boss, but Faehorn was still away on some assignment or another, and as such was incapable of relaying orders down the chain of command. Boxxy considered whether this timing was intentional, but it didn't care too much since it got paid regardless.

"Ah, Decanus," Silus greeted Keira as she entered his office. "Shall I take your speedy return as a sign that things went smoothly?"

"Yes, sir! No incidents whatsoever!" she happily saluted.

“That’s good. So, do you have the item?”

“Yeah! Uhh, should I show it to you here and now?”

“Indeed. Let’s see it.”

The beastkin reached into the pouch on her belt and brought out a small orb that was seven or eight centimeters in diameter. It was made of deep, orange amber with a high degree of transparency and a flawlessly smooth surface. A single blue flower with seven large petals was trapped inside the resin as if it were suspended in time.

“Oh my…. It’s… quite something, isn’t it?” stated the elf in admiration.

If this was truly what the Sandman had promised during their earlier communications, then the Republic had a very real chance at victory in the upcoming siege. If not, then they had been duped out of a small fortune. This was something he and his superiors judged was a worthwhile risk, despite the fact that the idea the masked man presented them with sounded outlandish and ludicrous at best. Silus personally felt like they were grasping at straws, but he still pushed his superiors to accept the Sandman’s deal. Both his job and his life were on the line, so he was rather pleased that this amber orb at least looked like the sort of precious treasure the masked man had claimed to possess.

“Yes, sir! It’s really pretty!”

Keira’s simplistic statement accompanied a blooming smile that seemed determined to outshine the item in her hands. If Underwood was a betting man, he’d put his money on the catgirl’s beautiful face winning that competition.

Wait, why am I comparing the two?!

The elf let a small frown float onto his lips, as he silently chastised himself. This was no time to admire his subordinate’s natural charm. Besides, he knew better than to try anything. Pursuing a personal relationship with her was a bad idea for so many reasons that he’d probably need a third hand to count them all.

“And how exactly do we use it?” he asked after that brief moment of self-reflection.

“Ah, that’s easy! Mister Sandman told me you just need hold onto it and say in a clear and commanding voice, ‘Mater est opus vobis.’”

“Wait, don’t just-” Silus tried to stop her, but it was too late.

FWOOOOM

The orb in the catgirl’s hands flashed with an intense yellow light before Underwood could stop her.

“Guh!”

“AAAAAARGH!”

The radiance temporarily blinded the elf and caused the catgirl to scream in a high-pitched wail. It took nearly twenty seconds for Underwood’s vision to begin to recover, and he could clearly hear Keira’s pained screams and panicked thrashing the whole time. It sounded like the redhead had fallen out of her seat and was rolling around on the floor in agony. That was only to be expected considering her much sharper eyesight was far more vulnerable to this sort of sensory overload.

SLAM

The man’s vision was still blurry and full of spots when a couple of soldiers barged into the room, no doubt to see what all the commotion was about.

“Sir! Are you alright?!” one of them asked.

“I’ll be fine!” Underwood shouted while rubbing his eyes. “Take the girl to the infirmary, quickly!”

This sort of magical flare could permanently damage someone’s eyesight, and Faehorn would have his head if he came back to find his star pupil in less-than-pristine condition.

“Sir, I believe that would be a very bad idea.”

“What are you talking about?! Get moving before- Before… Oh…”

As his eyes slowly readjusted themselves, he could make out Keira’s figure. She was curled up on the floor and holding onto her face with both hands, just as he’d expected. However, his previously impaired vision prevented

him from noticing when, where, or how, but it would appear the two of them had some unexpected company.

Underwood beheld the form of a small girl, seemingly no more than nine or ten years old. She had green skin, grass-like hair, and wore nothing but a cluster of giant leaves that draped over her like a summer dress. Even though she looked so young, the two soldiers were clearly fearful of her. Both of them were a part of Keira's escort unit and had been waiting for their own debriefing, so they very aware of just how terrifying this seemingly innocent creature could be. Silus, as their commanding officer, immediately caught on as well.

The child was a dryad, and she wasn't the only one. At first, the elf thought his messed-up vision was playing tricks on him, but now he was certain that there were, in fact, five of them. Five identical-looking immature dryads, presumably one for each of the hylt trees that made up the cornerstones of Fort Yimin's defensive line. Yet none of them seemed to care about or even notice any of the people in the room.

The only exception to this was the writhing catgirl on the ground. The mini-dryads huddled around her and stared at her suffering in total silence. Their identical faces sported the same expression of childlike wonder and curiosity. This went on for several seconds, until Keira's screaming and thrashing began to abate, at which point the five crouched down to get a better look at her. When the catgirl finally opened her eyes, she was greeted with the sight of five identical green faces looking down at her with some sort of unspoken expectation.

Not sure of what to do, the redhead forced a weak smile and spoke in a quiet, quivering voice.

"Uhm… H-Hello?"

The quintet of juvenile dryads smiled in response, and spoke up in a single, unified voice.

"Mummy!"

Part Five

Keira found herself in a decidedly odd situation. She sat in a large conference room she hadn't been in before. Five people were on the opposite end of an oval table in front of her and five more stood around her in a circle. All ten pairs of eyes were on her.

She officially knew only two of those on the opposite end of the room. They were her direct superiors—Silas Underwood and Milo Faehorn. The latter of them had returned from his assignment barely half an hour ago. Next to them was an older elf with slicked back black hair and the fanciest uniform. He was Legate Aidun, the officer that stood at the head of the Republic's 3rd Legion. Immediately to his right was a green-haired man who was extremely lanky and thin, even by elf standards. This fellow was named Drannor and he served as the Legate's right-hand man, advisor, and strategist. The last elf was a middle-aged woman who would look almost exactly like a younger Imiryl if not for her light, ginger hair that had been put up in a tidy ponytail. She was Prefect Vera, the high elf's niece and the officer in charge of Fort Yimin and the surrounding area.

Even if Kiera hadn't been formally introduced to the latter three, Boxxy still knew about them since it had talked to all of them remotely as the Sandman. The Comm-crystal it had given Underwood was actually laid out in the middle of the table should the reclusive vigilante contact them again. This was quite unlikely to happen at that time, much to the dismay of the elves gathered there. They urgently needed to speak with the Sandman about two pressing matters. The first was the item they had purchased from him earlier that day.

The second, and arguably more pressing issue, had to do with the five juvenile dryads that surrounded the young Decanus Morgana at the other end of the room.

"Mummy, mummy! How come you have those funny-looking leaves?" one asked while tugging on the beastkin's feline ears.

"Mummy, how do you make saplings if you don't have flowers?" inquired another who sat in her lap.

“Muuuum! Torenia keeps hogging all the morning sunlight!” complained a third, tugging on her right arm.

“I can’t help it if I just grew on that side of you!” the culprit in question stomped her feet indignantly.

“Nnnn…. Mummy… it itches…” whined the last one while pulling on Keira’s other arm with a pleading face.

The elven leaders shared some difficult looks as the noisy disturbance didn’t seem like it would end anytime soon.

“Well, at least we know the item worked as promised,” said Drannor the strategist, his voice oozing with sarcasm.

“This is a dream, right? Haha, yes, a dream, that’s what this is,” Vera buried her face in her palms.

“Calm yourself, Prefect,” Underwood reprimanded. “You’re being unsightly in front of our… guests.”

“What guests?!” the woman snapped. “They’ve been here far before any of us have, right?! If anyone here is a guest, it’s *us*!”

“Well… You’re not wrong…” Silus answered wearily.

“Primus Underwood is correct,” the Legate took charge. “This is no time to panic. We have to assess and adapt to the situation.”

Vera seemed to calm down a bit at those words, though Aidun’s slightly quivering voice showed he wasn’t completely undisturbed by this turn of events either.

“Continue your report, Primus.”

“Yes, sir,” responded Underwood with a respectful nod of his head. “So, after Decanus Morgana accidentally triggered the Authority, the dryads you now see appeared in my office. They’ve been following her around incessantly since.”

“This seems a bit wrong, though,” Faehorn chimed in.

The veteran Ranger had been made aware of the situation through Comm-crystals while he was out on his mission, so he knew the gist of what had

been going on in his absence. He fully understood the circumstances after Underwood finished bringing everyone up to speed just now, not to mention seeing the dryads with his very eyes.

“What do you mean ‘wrong?’” asked Drannor. “The Authority called out the dryads and made them respect the user, just like the Sandman said it would.”

The Elder Dryad’s Authority was the name of the amber orb the elves had received from the masked vigilante. It was something that Ambrosia had personally prepared for Boxxy when she found out her new ‘tenant’ would be headed further south and might come in contact with her daughters. Strictly speaking, it was highly unlikely they would be her direct offspring, as the seeds that spawned them could have come from any hylt tree. Such details didn’t seem to matter much to her kind, however. All dryads could trace their lineage back to Azurvale’s original twelve, so each one would instantly recognize Ambrosia or one of her peers as their ‘mother’ without a second thought.

Of course, that didn’t mean they would actually meet in person. A dryad’s way of life meant it was likely impossible for them to meet others of their kind, unless they happened to grow up in close proximity to one another. However, that instinctual parental recognition was exactly why the Authority was so potent. Simply put, the amber orb was a vessel containing Ambrosia’s highly condensed mana—her essence, or ‘scent.’ This stored energy could be released in a single burst by anyone who spoke the words, ‘Mater est opus vobis,’ which loosely translated from the Divine tongue to, ‘Mother has need of you,’ while holding onto the orb. This would, in turn, summon all the dryads in the area to the orb, and they would instinctively regard the item’s bearer as a messenger from their mother and treat them favorably. Indeed, that was how the Sandman and Cyrilla first met, and the situation in that meeting room proved the masked stranger was not talking out of his ass when he explained the item’s function. Boxxy had, of course, omitted certain incriminating details and specifics, but it had otherwise been entirely truthful.

“Well,” Faehorn scratched his chin, “accidental activation aside, their behavior is a lot more extreme than ‘favorable treatment.’ They completely

think of the girl as their actual mum, don't they?"

"He has a point," Vera weakly agreed. "And how come they're all little kids?"

"Good question," nodded Legate Aidun. "Well, Decanus? Anything you can tell us about all this?"

"M-m-m-me?! Why are you asking me?!" Keira responded in a shrill voice, then remembered her place. "I mean, sir."

"If not you then, who?"

"W-well, I don't- I can't, uh…"

She glanced at the five immature tree spirits around her, but stopped herself from suggesting something painfully obvious and stupidly redundant. The committee had already tried questioning them directly numerous times, but the five dryads ignored them and their questions completely. It was as if Keira was the only person whose existence was worth acknowledging. They were quite arrogant for a bunch of brats, to be sure.

"Why don't you try asking them for yourself, miss Morgana?" Faehorn suggested.

"Oh, of course! Err, how should I even call them?" she mumbled quietly while the five green children pestered her. "*Ahem!* Kids?"

"Yes, mummy?"

All of them stopped what they were doing and responded in total unison with the exact same innocent smile on their faces.

"W-why do you think I'm your mummy?" the redhead asked.

"You smell like our mummy. Therefore, you are mummy."

Again their voices rang out in perfect sync, accompanied by simultaneous head nods.

"S-smell?"

"Yep! It's the same smell as the fancy light that woke us up!"

The truth had to do with their species' millennia-long lifecycle, which meant their kind matured incredibly slowly compared to other living creatures. They also spent the vast majority of their 'childhood' sleeping, blissfully unaware of the world around them. Many never even bothered to wake up, unless some grave threat or major disturbance befell their trees.

If one considered this fact, then it was extremely likely that this was the first time this bunch was actually awake. Not knowing any better, the dryads had assumed that the being bathed in that motherly essence was a mother-like existence to them. Unfortunately, Boxxy knew nothing about any of this. It would need to have a long chat with Ambrosia on the subject later, but for now it was just as befuddled as the rest of the room.

"Good enough, I suppose," said Aidun. "Decanus, leave the room and wait outside until further notice."

"Y-yes, sir!"

The catgirl stood up with a salute and left the room with her chattering entourage in tow. Their high-pitched voices could still be heard faintly through the thick door, but the room was significantly quieter than before. The Legate was the first one to break the newly descended almost-silence.

"So, Faehorn, in your opinion, do you think she can control those dryads?"

"I wouldn't know, sir," the Ranger responded honestly. "Morgana seems to have a handle on things for the moment, but control? You'd have to consult someone else, this really isn't my area of expertise. Maybe Imiryl has some insights on this?"

"Ah, that's going to be difficult, sir," Underwood butted in. "She had an… unfortunate altercation with the dryad that shelters the Sandman, so she adamantly refuses to be anywhere near one of their kind, let alone five."

"An altercation, you say? I didn't hear anything about that."

Silus briefly explained the details surrounding that event, including the humiliating spanking she had received in front of the troops. This news surprised the Ranger. Taking down a powerful VIP and an entire armed and alert platoon of soldiers in a matter of seconds was quite the feat to say the least. The Sandman had, during their last communication, claimed that

Cyrilla hadn't even broken a sweat, so to speak. The stranger had used the incident as an example of just how terrifying a dryad could be to people. From there, he suggested that the elves might want to mobilize the tree spirits that lived in their precious fort, which led to him letting the Republic *borrow* the Elder Dryad's Authority for a nominal fee.

"I see… So that's what this meeting is really about," the Ranger nodded slowly. "You're trying to formulate a defense plan, not picking on the rookie for making a blunder?"

"As expected, you catch on quick, sir," Underwood offered a wry smile.

The idea was rather straightforward—lure the enemy force inside the fort's walls and use the dryads' power to subdue them en-masse. Once immobilized, and secured, the elves could do whatever they wanted with them. Still, even if they pulled it off, there were bound to be those that escaped the trap. Faehorn's experience told him those restraints were not as all-powerful as they would appear at first glance.

While it was true that Imiryl got taken down without being able to put up a fight, that was mostly because she was ill-suited for that sort of situation. A Wizard, however mighty, was no different from a civilian once their MP ran out. An absurdly muscle-headed existence like Hilda, on the other hand, would likely be able to rip, tear, and chop her way out of those roots and vines with brute strength. The Ranger himself was certain he could avoid being caught with his superior speed and reflexes, even if the plants took him by surprise.

In short, the defenders would have to remain vigilant even in the event that this plan worked. It was questionable how dependable this idea actually was, but it was a real chance at an actual victory the elves wouldn't have otherwise.

"I guess I can't fault you people for taking that chance," Faehorn commented.

"Well, it was hardly the easiest decision to make," the strategist shook his head. "Honestly, I don't like it one bit. There are far too many unknowns regarding Primus Underwood's contact. And I don't like 'unknowns.' Also-"

“We’ve already discussed this at length, Drannor,” the Legate cut him off. “Like it or not, we agreed that the potential benefits were well worth the risk.”

“The potential benefits being the ongoing existence of this fort, I’m guessing,” Vera chimed in.

“Your sarcasm is noted, Prefect,” Aidun curtly responded. “In any event, we may be off to a rough start, but the item seems to have worked perfectly. What became of it after the Decanus… misfired it?”

“The answer is right in front of you, sir,” reported Underwood while gesturing at the brown, muddled orb on the table. “What you see there is the object, but it no longer holds any of the radiant luster it had when I first saw it. We’ll confirm it later to be sure, but even I can tell it’s more or less lost its power.”

That wouldn’t be permanent, though. In truth, it just needed a week or so to recharge itself, but that wasn’t something the elves needed to know. Nor would they have the time to wait that long, as the Imperial invasion was expected to arrive within the next three or four days. Faehorn and his teams spent most of the last week trying to slow them down, but they were unable to do much damage to a thirty-thousand-strong army. The 1st Scouting Battalion had already effectively blown their load with that landslide ambush on the first expeditionary force. While it was a huge success, it meant the Republic had shown the Empire their hand. As a direct result, the main force was much more thorough and careful in their approach, leaving little room for the elves to pull any tricks. Harassing the Empire’s scouts in small skirmishes was pretty much all the Republic’s soldiers could do.

“I see. That is most unfortunate,” the Legate said grimly. “Regardless of the… complications,” he glared at Keira’s empty seat, “we still have a hard battle ahead of us. Is there any chance of Operation Honeytrap succeeding at this point?”

He looked around the table, silently asking for the others’ input.

“I’m of the opinion I’d much rather rely on our soldiers than these dryads,” noted the strategist. “While our defeat is almost certain, it is our duty to inflict as much damage to these invaders as we can. Otherwise they’ll

regroup and move onto our next stronghold further north. Allowing those things to run wild could jeopardize not only this fort, but the entire region."

It was a cold, calculated argument meant to minimize the overall damage to the Ishigar Republic. Losing Fort Yimin would be painful, but it was better than giving up the rich mithril mine that lay deeper in Republic territory.

"I disagree, sir," Underwood spoke up. "I think we should give Decanus Morgana a chance to make up for her blunder."

"Are you certain it was an honest mistake?" Aidun asked pointedly.

"I am sure of it, sir. She hadn't been briefed on what the item or its function were, nor would my 'contact' have had reason to inform her of those details."

"You are confident she can be trusted?"

"Yes, sir. I've investigated her background, personal relationships, and personality as much as I could in this short amount of time. While she may not hold genuine loyalty to the Republic itself, her motivation to protect those closest to her is genuine. Not to mention she has reason enough to bear a heavy grudge towards the Empire, and would not let them do as they please."

"So what? She's trustworthy because she's the enemy of our enemy?" Vera raised an eyebrow.

"Something like that, ma'am."

Silus personally disagreed with that old adage. In his opinion, the enemy of his enemy was his enemy's enemy, nothing more, nothing less. However, this was neither the right time nor place to argue semantics or philosophy.

"Will the dryads follow her instructions?" Drannor asked the important question. "Just because they have a 'favorable impression' of her doesn't mean they'll just blindly obey."

"I wouldn't suggest we involve her if I thought she was incapable of doing so, sir."

Those words seemed enough to convince the pessimistic strategist. Silus Underwood was an expert at handling personnel and sniffing out people's

true intentions. That was why he had been appointed as the one responsible for the highly individualistic adventurers in the first place. If he insisted Keira could be trusted, then the others had no reason to doubt his judgement.

“How do we know they’re capable of doing the same as this other one down south?” Vera pointed out. “Appearances aside, they themselves said they just ‘woke up,’ right? Would they even know how to use their abilities?”

“Oh, we can easily ascertain their ability,” Faehorn leaned back in his chair. “The real problem is making them understand friend from foe, and motivating them to act on our behalf.”

“That’s exactly why I said we should give up on them,” chimed in the strategist. “They don’t just look like children. They completely act the part. They’re far too innocent.”

“Hmm, I suppose there is that, too,” the Ranger scowled.

“What do you mean? Was this not what you were talking about?” Drannor raised an eyebrow.

“There is no such thing as an ‘innocent’ monster, Drannor. And make no mistake, that is exactly what those creatures are. Unless we properly motivate them, they will not lift a single finger for our sake, even if their ‘mother’ told them to do it.”

The room fell silent as everyone mulled over the Ranger’s words. They carried the weight of over sixty years of adventuring experience, and the passion of a man who truly loved his country and its people.

“I think,” Legate Aidun spoke up after a brief pause, “there is merit to using those chil- those dryads. However, I would like to speak to the one most concerned before making a decision.”

“Should I fetch the Decanus, sir?”

“Please do, Primus.”

Underwood stood up with a salute and went out of the room for a moment. It wasn’t until he opened the door that the elven leaders realized the

chattering of the quintuplets had died down at some point. The cause became apparent when the beastkin returned carrying a sleeping dryad on each arm, while the other three trailed behind with drowsy steps. When she sat back in her seat, they all laid down at her feet and fell asleep while she looked over them with a mix of patience and concern.

"…"

Nobody could say a thing. Regardless of the circumstances, she looked exactly like a mother tending to her young. Motherhood was an almost-sacred thing in elven culture, so they couldn't just thoughtlessly interrupt.

"Uhm… Sir?"

It wasn't until Keira spoke up that the Legate snapped out of the stupor.

"Ah, yes. It seems you have reached some sort of understanding with these… children."

"Uhm, I- I suppose you could say that, sir."

"I see."

Judging from how they slumbered undisturbed despite the conversation, it was probably safe to keep talking. Still, the elves subconsciously lowered their voices. All of them looked perfectly serene and at peace, and having the slightly smiling beastkin look over them painted a rather uniquely precious scene.

I didn't ask for thiiiiis!

Inside Keira's head, however, Boxxy was fuming.

These damned plants! Why do they have to make so many demands!? Always with the 'mummy this' and 'mummy that!' Argh! Why the crap did I activate the shiny ball like that?! Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid!

This time around the shapeshifter truly had nobody to blame but itself. It had gotten a bunch of Levels during its recent gnoll hunt and had also found a new and surprisingly tasty way to enjoy its food. It then got paid and would likely receive even more money in the future if things went well. With its head so full of shiny thoughts, it completely zoned out and

triggered the Elder Dryad's Authority by accident. Its original plan was to have someone else handle the matter while Keira sat on the sidelines. The shapeshifter feared that its persona would attract the wrong kind of attention if it continued to be publicly involved with the matter. That and Boxxy seriously did *not* want to deal with any more dryads.

At least Cyrilla was smart enough to recognize the creature wasn't her real mother. Their arrangement was temporary, an understanding of sorts. She would help the Sandman, and in return the Sandman's minions would help her with any miscellaneous requests. It was a simple, straightforward, and non-intrusive agreement. That was well and good, but Boxxy still wanted to avoid having to make deals with any more of her kind if at all possible.

And yet here it was. Saddled with five damnable, selfish brats that would. Not. Shut. Up!

Ah, this isn't like me. I need to calm down.

Boxxy realized its temper had been flaring up a bit too often as of late. Though it once had near-infinite patience as a simple mimic, its transformation into a doppelganger seemed to have shortened its fuse significantly. It couldn't help but wonder—were all doppelgangers like this? Or maybe the way it kept forcing itself to be so expressive all the time had some sort of feedback that affected its normally cool and collected state of mind? Whatever the cause, it was definitely a problem. If it hadn't been so excited during the hand-off earlier, then it wouldn't have gotten itself in this mess to begin with.

Hypothetical situations aside, the reality of the matter was that it was far too deep in this to just back out now, and it needed to make the most of it. At the very least, the dryads would be physically unable to follow once it left this place behind. Even if they tried, they would have no choice but to return to their trees unless they wanted to die. The shapeshifter just had to put up with them until that moment came.

That tasty thought seemed to help calm the monster's troubled mind, so it decided to keep focusing on it.

"So, do you think you can do it, Decanus?"

Oh right, this guy wants me to play dryad tamer for a few days.

The Legate spent the last few minutes laying out plans for the upcoming siege. Boxxy only half-listened since it gave them the idea in the first place. It just really, *really* didn't want to be responsible for its execution since the shapeshifter had no idea whether this 'Operation Honeytrap' thing would succeed. Its only real concern during its sales pitch had been to make it sound plausible enough to convince this bunch to hand over a criminal amount of money. Truly, the only culprit behind Boxxy's current predicament was its past self.

On the bright side, the monster had a newfound understanding of a certain idiom regarding reaping and sowing.

"I believe so, sir," Keira nodded after a moment of consideration.

"Oh?" Aidun raised an eyebrow. "You sound remarkably confident."

"It really isn't that complicated. It shouldn't be too hard to tell the troops apart since the army colors are so different."

The Empire's forces liked to tout uniforms, cloaks, and tabards that were royal blue with golden embroidery, which would be worn over black armor. The Republic's heraldry, on the other hand was predominantly grey and silver with a black trim.

"Yes, that much is a given. But how do you plan to… motivate them?"

"Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted."

"Well, listening to these *darlings* go on and on made it sound like they think of themselves as trees first and people second. They act like children, too. So, if we want to get on their good side, we just need to give them stuff that trees would like. Oh, and I guess they're probably closer to monsters than people, but that just means they'll respond to bribes and bait better than words or promises."

"Hmm, very observant, Decanus. A surprisingly sound judgement," noted the Legate with a grand nod.

Faehorn failed to withhold a smug smile upon witnessing a high-ranking officer approve of his former student, despite her rambling and scatter-brained explanation.

“So then, what would we offer to their trees? Maybe some pest control or medical aid is in order?” Aidun cupped his chin as he thought back on their words earlier. “One of them mentioned something about itching. Perhaps she’s suffering from some sort of infestation or infection we could assist with?”

“Oh, I actually already thought of something way better,” Keira proudly declared. “Uh, sir.”

“And what would that be, Decanus?”

“Fertilizer, sir. Enough to satisfy all five of these kids’ trees.”

“Yes, that was my first thought as well. There’s just one problem,” Aidun leaned forward on his elbows. “Where do you propose we find that much manure on such short notice, Decanus?”

“It’s already on its way, sir.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

The catgirl’s face shifted slightly. Her mouth was still curled up in an innocent smile, but her eyes practically oozed with hatred as she gave voice to her darker thoughts.

“We have thirty thousand bags of first-grade fertilizer walking towards us at this very moment, do we not?”

It was the kind of monstrous logic only a deeply disturbed individual could think up.

Part Six

A heavy silence hung over the meeting room. Faehorn, Underwood, Aidun, Drannor, and Vera looked at the empty seat in front of them with bitter faces. All of them were either unable or unwilling to say anything. A few minutes passed like this since the person responsible for this heavy mood had left the room. With a smile and a spring in her step, no less.

“Thirty thousand bags of fertilizer…”

As per usual, the first one to break the silence was Aidun, Legate of the 3rd Legion. He spoke in a quiet tone that was unbefitting of him as he slumped back in his chair. Having heard those chilling words once again injected some life back into his colleagues.

“Heh. Well, she’s technically right, I suppose,” Drannor chuckled dryly.

“Those eyes, though,” Vera shook her head. “It’s like she literally doesn’t see the Empire’s troops as people anymore. It may be a good attitude for a soldier to have, but as a person…”

“I fucking hate this war,” growled Faehorn.

“You’ll have plenty of chances to hate it later, old friend,” Underwood slapped the Ranger on the back. “It hasn’t even started for real yet.”

“When did she become like this, Silus? She used to be this bright-eyed girl filled with hope and ambition. Now she’s… like *that*.”

“It’s just the shock of recent events. I bet this all just feels surreal to her right now, which is why she’s acting out like this.”

“You said she had ample reason to hate the Empire,” spoke the Legate, “but even I find that much animosity disturbing. What exactly did she go through, Primus?”

“As far as I understand from interviewing her close confidants, an Imperial patrol killed her parents. She’d been told it was an accident, but she believes it was both intentional and malicious, and holds a deep grudge towards the enemy’s military and authority. And that was before she and her teammates were captured and humiliated by the enemy.”

“Ah, of course.”

The alleged incident had been described fully in one of the recent reports, but with so much going on it momentarily slipped his mind. Underwood didn’t seem to want to discuss the matter further, and Aidun was in total agreement. Keira’s mentor couldn’t help himself, though.

“Did I mention I fucking hate this gods-damned war?”

“Your displeasure at our foreign political situation is noted, Faehorn,” the Legate groaned. “Still, I’m not going to pretend I understand her feelings, but I can’t fault her for her resentment.”

“I’m more worried about those dryads, myself,” the strategist changed the topic. “Even if the ‘demonstration’ tomorrow proves they can be used, the effects an actual war will have on them… If they develop a taste for blood, we may have to abandon the fort for good.”

“Well, I doubt they’ll actually do it for the ‘fertilizer,’” the Ranger replied. “If dryads were really after stuff like that, the capital would be a graveyard by now.”

“You said it yourself though,” Vera chimed in. “They’re still technically monsters, even if they carry Nyrie’s blessing as the legends say. Doesn’t that mean they may see us as the enemy eventually?”

“I think it will be fine, so long as we don’t agitate or harm them or their trees in any way. They clearly don’t bear us any ill will. If that wasn’t the case, Imiryl’s prideful gaffe would have cost her far more dearly than a spanking.”

The Prefect conceded the point with a firm nod, and the group continued discussing the long-term ramifications of Operation Honeytrap lasted for another half hour. They hadn’t even given the final say-so on whether they would attempt it, so it was important to consider all the potential outcomes and risks. Old battlefields near ancient hylt trees were brought up, religion and the Goddess Nyrie’s will were touched upon, and various contingencies were roughly outlined.

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This came to an abrupt end when the sole Comm-crystal in the room flashed and vibrated against the wooden table it rested on. The discussion came to an abrupt end as the five elven officers shared a few knowing looks. With a nod from the Legate, Underwood reached over, grabbed the item, and accepted the call. The transparent, blue-colored image of a man with a cloth wrapped around his head and a heavy cloak on his broad shoulders appeared out of thin air.

“Lord Underwood.”

The voice was completely befitting that appearance. Which was to say it was deep, ominous, and a bit raspy. Silus furrowed his brows and sighed as he remembered the previously agreed-upon identification code.

“Hear me, my good fellows, lend me thy ears-” he started.

“-for I have left mine in my other trousers,” the vigilante finished.

“It is good to hear from you, mister Sandman.”

This was one of several similarly ludicrous pass phrases this masked individual insisted on using. It was a bit rudimentary, but necessary. The other party refused to reveal their face and Silus needed some other way to confirm that he was talking to the real deal, and not some random guy in a cloak. In reality, the image he was looking at was actually a succubus filling in for her preoccupied master. This ruse was fairly simple, since the Comm-crystal showed only the bust of the other party holding it, making it painfully easy to obscure things like height or build. A bit of shapeshifting, a spare disguise, and copious amounts of telepathic communication handled the rest.

“Likewise,” the not-a-Sandman nodded. “I trust your compatriots and leaders are with you as per usual?”

“Indeed, they are,” Silus confirmed.

Comm-crystals projected only the voice and visage of the one holding them, so Xera could neither see nor hear the rest of Fort Yimin’s leadership. They let Underwood handle the talking for the most part, but they had all formally introduced themselves during previous communications by passing the cube from one person to the next. Everyone except for Faehorn.

The others hadn't made the Sandman aware of the high elf's attendance because he'd be less likely to let down his guard if he knew. Or so Silus theorized.

"I trust you have already tried out my little bauble and confirmed its ability?" the masked man inquired.

Underwood looked towards the Legate, as if asking how to answer.

"Do not tell him about the Decanus. Just say we have confirmed its effects," was the given order.

The intelligence officer nodded and turned his attention back to the Sandman.

"In a manner of speaking. There were some complications, but nothing we can't handle."

"Very good. I trust you will not misuse Nyrie's children for your own ends."

"Should we ask him whether letting the youngling dryads fight our war for us is a good idea?" Vera suggested.

"A good idea," Aidun nodded. "Relay her question, Primus."

"Yes, about that. We are having a quandary whether that would be best for us in the long run," Silus told the Sandman.

"How so?" was the casual response.

"We have serious concerns that forcing so much death upon the immature dryads will turn them into bloodthirsty killers."

"Ahh. Ahahah. Hah hah hah. Haaaah."

The cloaked figure let out a low, dry, almost mocking laughter.

"You should not be so quick to force your point of view onto others, mister Underwood."

"Excuse me?"

"Tell me, do you give any mind to the grass and weeds you trample underfoot each day? Do you pay the buzzing flies in your office any more

attention than a moment of annoyance? Is the existence of rats in the sewer worth your notice?"

Silus frowned, as he had a rather unpleasant thought as to where this was going.

"It is the same thing for the dryads," the Sandman grinned under his mask. "As living creatures, it is their duty to defend themselves, but they are ultimately apathetic to the struggles of us lesser beings. Before them, we are all but specs of dust—insignificant and fleeting existences that will rapidly fade from their memory, even if noticed."

"As per usual, he says some rather depressing things," Drannor commented.

"To think we mere mortals can influence them to any meaningful degree is the height of arrogance," the cloaked figure concluded his speech.

"That is certainly a very *enlightening* point," Silus collected himself, "but children tend to be quite impressionable."

"Children? What do you mean?"

"Judging from what we've seen, Fort Yimin's dryads are extremely juvenile. They appear as ten-year-old children, both physically and mentally."

"Ah, that is… unexpected. I hoped they would be more mature, but it is what it is."

"Shall I infer from your tone of voice that you still don't think the war will have a negative impact on them?"

"It depends on the point of view. Once the Authority wears off in a week, they will all return to their slumber. It will be centuries before they wake up on their own, and anything they experience now will most likely be completely forgotten about, as if it were a hazy dream. Whether that's a good or bad thing, is something for history to decide."

This was information obtained directly from Ambrosia and passed along to Xera, who now relayed it to the elves. It was as accurate as it could be, though the officers had no way of knowing that.

“We appreciate the input,” Underwood said politely. “Speaking of the Authority-”

“I will want it back, of course,” the Sandman cut them off. “Though I suppose if you wanted to keep it for yourself, then I wouldn’t be able to stop you.”

“There will be no need for that. Please be assured that we plan to uphold our end of the bargain. Once we have confirmed the dryads’ effectiveness, we will send you the rest of the payment and the spent item through your chosen courier.”

“Very good, Lord Underwood.”

“Are we sure we want to do that?” asked Vera. “If that thing can let one control dryads, then the capital will be at his mercy.”

“Come on, we already discussed this,” Faehorn complained.

“We did?”

“Okay, maybe not *exactly* that,” the Ranger elaborated, “but we concluded that the Authority’s function is like a *really* loud knock on the door. Yes, it grabs the dryads’ attention, but there’s no compulsion involved. Sure, those five seem to be glued to Morgana and hang off her every word, but that’s because they’re youngsters that don’t know any better. I can’t imagine any one man can convince the old hags of the capital to turn on us after millennia of coexistence.”

The man imagined Azurvale’s original twelve to be akin to the grumpy old ladies that sat on benches in parks and quietly judged everyone who walked past. To his credit, it was a surprisingly apt comparison, apart from the fact that said ‘old ladies’ looked a lot more… *fertile* than one might expect from beings that ancient.

“Ah, just so we’re clear on this—expect to see me at the siege.”

The Sandman’s words caused everyone’s attention to snap back to the glowing blue cube in Underwood’s hands.

“Will we get another bill for your services, then?” Silus asked with a wry smile.

“No. This one’s on the house.”

“Is it now? How come?”

“I’m just, shall we say, protecting my investment,” he responded cryptically.

“I see. Whatever your reasons, do make sure you wear our army’s colors when the time comes. Would hate for our men to mistake you for an enemy combatant.”

“Who knows? I just might become one, if the price is right.”

The elf made a bitter face, as he was harshly reminded that the Sandman’s loyalties lied not with the Ishigar Republic or its people, but its coin.

“Heeeh, heeeh, heeeh,” the masked man chuckled humorlessly. “Very well, mister Underwood. If you so wish it, then my minions and I shall fly your army’s silver flag on the field. Expect to hear from me again, same time tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

The communication cut off abruptly, and Silus let out a subdued sigh of relief. These conversations with ‘mister Sandman’ were far more stressful than he let on.

“What minions is he talking about?” Faehorn asked.

“Demons, most likely,” Silus responded. “We’ve already determined him to be a Warlock, and that he has at least two of them in his service, possibly three.”

“I’m more worried about what he meant by that, ‘protecting his investment’ statement,” Drannor interjected.

“He’s probably hoping we’ll keep him around as an assassin or mercenary after the siege, possibly even after the war.”

Underwood’s guess seemed reasonable, but in truth that line was just a cheap excuse for Boxxy to join in the mayhem and collect its share of XP and human flesh.

“We’ll see how the winter season finds us,” the Legate decreed. “As for the matter of the dryads, I will withhold my final decision until I see what our Decanus has for us tomorrow.”

The meeting adjourned, and Underwood, Vera, and Faehorn left the room in an orderly and quiet fashion. The Legate and his strategist wanted to discuss things in private, so they stayed behind. The sun was still up, so the high elf Ranger went out to the courtyard to mull things over while the others returned to their duties.

And there he saw a bizarre scene. Keira was giving one of the juvenile dryads a ride on her shoulders, while the rest of them crowded around her. The adorable scene of them arguing who was next on ‘Mummy’s branches’ did wonders to heal his troubled heart. Unlike before, the beastkin didn’t seem troubled or anxious, but was genuinely laughing and having fun as they walked in full view of the entire fort.

Keeping those kids’ existence a secret at this point was both impossible and unwise, so Underwood and Aidun had both given Keira permission to show them around the fort and introduce them to the troops. As expected, they drew an incredible amount of attention from adventurers and soldiers alike. A few of the hard-liners scoffed at the ‘undisciplined display,’ while others stared in blank amazement at the appearance of the legendary hylt tree guardians. Most of them were like Faehorn and simply enjoyed watching the uplifting sight without giving it too much thought. Even if they were technically monsters, the appearance of happy, giggling children could melt even the most jaded of hearts.

“Even if they’re monsters, huh?”

Faehorn’s thoughts drifted back to a discussion he and Silus had held earlier regarding the Sandman’s identity. Though the officer argued otherwise, the veteran adventurer’s intuition told him there was a literal monster behind that mask. However, though the vigilante certainly had the selfishness and general disregard for sentient life one expected from a non-enlightened creature, his behavior was far too atypical.

Generally speaking, one could categorize monsters as either feral or intelligent. The former would not bother with conversation and would

pursue their wants and needs with brute force and extreme aggression. These creatures were certainly dangerous, but it was the smart ones that were the real issue in Faehorn's professional opinion. A rampaging cyclops could attack a village and kill dozens of people before it was put down, but a devious and cunning creature could claim hundreds or even thousands of victims over a long period of time.

The intelligent ones knew just how much of a potential threat they were to society, and how said society would respond to that threat should it become known. The last thing these monsters wanted was to find themselves hunted down by a bunch of experienced adventurers armed to the teeth. Intelligent creatures therefore actively avoided drawing the attention of enlightened communities at large, especially those they recognized as wielding power and authority.

Yet, this Sandman directly approached and actively made deals with the military. A monster doing that sort of thing that only happened in terrible novels. Faehorn couldn't confidently state that the vigilante was not an enlightened individual, especially since his objective did legitimately seem to be acquiring wealth. Then there was the fact that, according to Silus, the Sandman had requested that future payments be delivered as equal numbers of knight, duke, and king pieces—coins worth 5, 20, and 50 GP, respectively. The only reason someone would make that sort of demand was if they planned to spend the money inconspicuously.

Well, either that or the vigilante was just hoarding wealth for wealth's sake. Except that the only monsters that did that were dragons, and the Sandman most certainly wasn't one of them. Size and shape aside, dragons did not make deals, they demanded tribute. They were the zenith of the food pyramid, the undisputed kings and queens of the monster world. Their power was so vast that an adventurer would need a Level at least ten times higher than the dragon's before he could even hope to challenge it. And that was only if it was a juvenile one.

Adult dragons took entire squads of Ranker adventurers to defeat, but at least they could be stopped. Elder dragons, which could go up to Level 75 of their Monster Job, were unfathomable existences that could literally topple nations by themselves if given enough reason. Thankfully, there

existed only four of those beasts in the known world, and none were anywhere near this part of the world.

One of them lorded over a stretch of land that once belonged to the dwarven-ruled Horkensaft Kingdom to the east—a highly volcanic region known as Hell. Another ruled over vast swathes of the Pearly Dunes desert —the beastkins' homeland far to the southeast on the literal other end of the continent. The last two weren't even on Atica. One of them resided at the bottom of the Shimmering Ocean while the last dwelled somewhere in the sprawling jungles of Velos, a landmass far to the south. The fact that the Republic didn't have to deal with those living calamities had always been something Faehorn was quietly thankful for.

"Mister Faehorn! Sir!"

Hearing Keira call his name snapped the old Ranger out of his thoughts. The redhead ran over to where he was idly leaning up against a wall while he wasn't paying attention. It was almost impressive he failed to notice Keira approach, considering one of the dryads rode her shoulders while the other four followed behind, bickering. The topic of their current argument seemed to focus on which one of them was the tallest, but Faehorn tried not to pay them too much mind.

"What is it, Morgana?" he asked in his usual cut-and-dry tone.

"I have some good news. Lilly told me something really good."

Her eyes pointed up at the dryad who happily played with the redhead's feline ears while murmuring something along the lines of 'So fuzzy!'

"Did she, now?" her mentor raised an eyebrow.

"Mhm. Hey, Lilly. Remember what you said earlier?"

"Hmm? About what, mummy?"

"You know, about people like mister Faehorn here?"

The dryad's emerald eyes met with the Ranger's. This was the first time he saw any of them acknowledge anyone's existence besides Keira's and their own. The experience was quite jarring, though mostly because he felt as if

the kid was staring straight into his soul. It lasted only for a moment, as she immediately turned her attention back towards the catgirl's ears.

"What about them?"

"You don't want to hurt them, right?"

"Of course not. If I'm mean towards them, then grandma Nyrie would be sad," Lilly casually stated.

"Making grandma sad would be bad," the other four echoed in unison.

"There you have it, mister Faehorn," Keira smiled. "That's good news, isn't it?"

"Ah, yes, it is. 'Good news' might actually be an understatement."

It would appear these dryads felt the influence of the Goddess of Fertility, and were forbidden from harming the enlightened. The myths about them stated something along those lines, but hearing it from the girl herself was immensely reassuring.

"Hey, Torenia!" Keira raised her voice. "Enough arguing about the evening sunlight, okay?"

"But she gets almost all of it!" one of them complained while pointing at the other.

"You get most of the morning sunlight in return though, don't you?" the redhead pointed out.

"… Yes?"

"Then you should be more tolerant of your sister!"

"Yes, mummy…"

"And Castelia! Don't let this go to your head!"

"Huh?!"

The dryad that Torenia had been bickering with put on a shocked expression.

"Mister Sun shines down on all of us. His light and warmth are things you should share and not selfishly hog to yourselves."

“Yes, mummy…”

The two answered in unison with sullen faces. Keira’s ‘serious business’ face softened into the usual smile and she patted their heads lightly, which they enjoyed quite a bit.

“Ah, mister Faehorn, will his excellency the Legate be needing me again today?”

“Not that I’m aware of. Why do you ask?”

The catgirl gently stroked the heads of one of the dryads to her left, the one that scratched her shoulder the entire time.

“Birchis here seems to have a termite nest in her upper branches, and I want to take my men to clear it out while we have the chance.”

She was officially a Decanus, which meant she already had her own ten-man squad assigned to her.

“Ah, then that should be alright. Though I gotta say, I’m surprised you can tell them apart.”

Personalities and behavioral quirks aside, the quintuplets looked completely identical. Only the bushels of ‘hair’ on their heads showed any deviation as they swayed gently in the wind, but that was not nearly enough to differentiate between them.

“It’s really not that difficult once you figure out they always stand on the same side,” the redhead cheerfully revealed.

“What do you mean?”

The catgirl pointed towards one of the massive trees on her right, one of the cornerstones of Fort Yimin’s fortifications.

“See, that’s Torenia-”

She then pointed to the tree that was immediately to the west of it.

“-and that’s Castelia. The one directly behind me is Lilly, that one over there is Birchis, and that last one over there is Pinea!”

“Oh, I see!” Faehorn exclaimed in realization.

The way the hylt trees were positioned around the fort and the formation the children made around their ‘mother’ lined up perfectly. Indeed, their relative positions drew the same irregular pentagon as the fort’s walls, if one were to look at them with a bird’s eye view. They probably lined up like that subconsciously, like a natural compass, or a homing instinct of some sort. Whatever it was, it compelled them to be even a few steps closer to their respective trunks, hence their arrangement.

“To think, it was something like that… And here I thought your maternal instincts were kicking in.”

“What?” Keira was taken aback.

“I mean, you hit it off so well with them it’s almost like they’re your actual kids. I’m sure you’ll make a great mother someday.”

“Ah… yeah…”

The catgirl’s dispirited response and diminishing smile seemed to raise the ire of the dryads, who glared at Faehorn with angry frowns. For the briefest moment, the Ranger felt like he saw the titanic trees in the distance shift slightly out of the corner of his eye. The distant rumbling was barely audible even to his excessively sharp ears and even more worrisome. Thankfully, nothing of real consequence happened as his pupil trotted off towards her quarters. The quintuplets followed, though it was impossible not to notice that she no longer had that spring in her step.

“Hey, Keira! Heading back to the barracks?”

The beastkin passed by Lia on the way, but responded to the elf girl’s greeting with a lazy wave of her hand and a lifeless, ‘Hey, yeah.’ Noticing her friend’s sour mood, her green-haired classmate looked in the direction she came from, and her eyes met Faehorn’s dumbfounded stare. She approached the older Ranger with a displeased look, and the man braced for an argument.

“Mister Faehorn? What did you do to upset Keira so badly?”

Sure enough, the first thing Lia did was accuse him of wrongdoing.

“For the last time, miss Torlee, I don’t bully my students for my own amusement,” he frowned at her unspoken accusation.

True, he was a strict and uncompromising teacher, but it was for their own good. The life of an adventurer was harsh, and he prepared the youngsters harshly. This method had been doubly necessary with this unfortunate war business looming over everyone's heads.

"Oh, uh, of course," Lia backtracked a little. "Still, you clearly said something that hurt her feelings."

"I did no such thing. We just had a brief chat regarding those dryads, and then she started sulking when I complimented her on being a good mother figure to them."

Lia closed her eyes, drooped her shoulders, and sighed heavily. She had stepped in that particular trap herself, earlier that day. Keira felt rather depressed that she'd never have children of her own. After all, her romance with Rowana would never bear that sort of fruit no matter how intense or passionate they felt. The two of them couldn't even adopt unless they were officially married, which was unlikely to happen when considering the current laws and culture of the Republic.

Of course, there was no way Faehorn would know all this, and Lia didn't feel like explaining it to him. Not only would spilling the beans on Keira's private life be a violation of her trust, but she was sure he wouldn't understand and would somehow make things worse if she told him.

"Honestly, this is why men are…"

In the end she just walked off while muttering under her breath and shaking her head, leaving the old elf in an even more confused state of mind.

"… What?" he asked the air around him. "What did I say?"

Chapter Six
Veni, Vidi, Edi

Part One

Fort Yimin was built within the only hylt tree grove in the Clattering Plains, which consisted of exactly five of the titanic trees. It stood out like a sore thumb amidst the grassy open fields surrounding it for at least a dozen kilometers in every direction. The fort existed on that spot for three hundred years, yet hadn't been attacked even once. Though there were numerous armed conflicts between the Lodrak Empire and Ishigar Republic since its construction, the border had simply been too far away for the fort to be in any real danger.

However, on this morning, that centuries-old eyesore would finally be put to its intended use. The Empire had arrived with a force of thirty thousand soldiers, who were currently forming ranks on the surrounding plains. Fort Yimin's defenders lined up atop and behind the walls. None of them were strangers to combat, but this would be the first real taste of open warfare for many. It was only natural they would be nervous or frightened.

Such individuals were far and few between among these thirteen thousand defenders. Over half of them were professional soldiers belonging to the 3rd Republic Legion. Another two thousand were part of the garrison detachment normally stationed at the fort. These troops had been temporarily assimilated into the Legion's command structure. The remaining four thousand were adventurers drafted into service by the government. Compared to the opposing force over twice the size and comprised entirely of military personnel, they were outclassed and outnumbered. Yet, most of them were calm and resolute.

A single glance at one of the titanic hylt trees was enough to fill them with the courage to push down their fear. They had five of the legendary dryads on their side. A simple glance at the stoic, unflinching hylt trees was enough to help steel their hearts and minds for what was to come. It was atop a relatively low, but practically high branch, that Faehorn made his roost. He used his Skills to carefully observe the enemy and reported what he saw through the Comm-crystal in his hand. He looked without having to aim, which allowed him to focus entirely on peering into the distance to such a

fine degree that he could easily see the faces of people that were over a kilometer away.

“I’ve confirmed the presence of three VIPs,” he said matter-of-factly. “One of them’s that ‘Holy Necromancer,’ and he’s got his own division of roughly a hundred death knights.”

The man in question was draped head-to-toe in a long, pale robe with bits of metal armor on top. A hood covered his ashen hair, while a cloth mask concealed all but the pale skin around his dull red eyes. His arms held onto a bone staff that was modeled to look like a scythe. As for his rather absurd moniker, that was something he earned because of the rather unorthodox way he practiced necromancy. For one thing, he always made sure to get permission before using a corpse, either from the individual themselves while they were still alive, or from their next of kin. He then performed secret rituals to sanctify the remains before reanimating them.

All in all, it was a long-winded process that was lengthy and expensive, but the result was the creation of Hallowed Dead. One could easily tell these apart from regular undead because their forms and armor were bleached pure white, as opposed to the dark and gloomy hues one would expect. Not only that, but the living didn’t feel any of the revulsion one would expect. The Hallowed Dead weren’t particularly stronger or tougher than regular undead, but the nature of their creation gave them two distinct advantages. The first was that their master would not suffer the wrath of Mortimer, God of Death and Commerce, and could avoid being branded with the stigma of Taboo. The other was that these Hallowed Dead were far less vulnerable to holy and fire magic, mitigating the undead’s major weakness.

“The second is the ‘Loose Cannon,’ Lerion,” Faehorn continued his report.

This one was known to be a dangerous Wizard that specialized in long-range, wide-area magical attacks. He was essentially a piece of artillery that walked on two legs. He was one of the few VIPs whose Ultimate Skill was known—a nasty piece of magic called Particle Cannon. It was an energy beam powerful enough to punch a hole clean through Fort Yimin’s walls in one go, perhaps even breaching the keep itself.

“The last confirmed sighting is that ‘Black Tower’ fellow, Ruk’lunda.”

Next in the Ranger's sights was a Shaman whose nickname came from his towering build, dark skin, and tendency to fight topless. His upper body was covered in various ritualistic tattoos and markings. His weapon of choice was a massive wooden pillar almost as tall as him with various animal shapes carved into it like a totem pole.

What truly set him apart from the others was that he was known to be an adventurer and wasn't technically part of the Imperial army. It was unclear how the Empire persuaded him to show up, as his reputation made it clear he wasn't easily motivated by gold or glory. In fact, the Republic's Foreign Intelligence Bureau had at one time suspected him of being the Sandman due to his abnormally large build and altruistic nature. That theory had gone out the window the instant the vigilante had sent the elves his invoice, but that was beside the point.

"I see a possible fourth one," Faehorn added as he peered at the enemy formations. "A woman in dark-colored light armor and a blue tabard. She's holding a metal staff, black with gold-colored detailing at both ends. I can't see much of her face because of that hood she has on, but the insignia on her shoulder is clearly that of the Gilded Hand."

"Understood," Underwood answered through the cube in his hand. "Keep an eye out for the remaining two."

The fifth 'VIP' the Republic expected was a certain nobleman with a questionable reputation, a Warlock that went by the name of Arakawa Shinji. He was supposed to be an old man in a dark robe accompanied by a demonic entourage, but the elf saw no one that fit the description. There were quite a few Warlocks with familiars among their ranks, but none of them really stood out. Typically, the VIPs would receive preferential treatment and be put up on a pedestal to inspire the troops around them. If Shinji chose to hide away among his lower-Leveled colleagues, confirming his presence was impossible by sight alone.

Far less was known about the Empire's sixth and final powerhouse. In fact, the only information the FIB unearthed about him was that he was a dwarven adventurer who had no affiliations with the military or the nobility. Faehorn made a token attempt to locate anyone who fit that description, but gave up soon after. He instead focused his efforts onto trying to spot any

deception or ruse within the Empire's movements. It seemed, however, that they were not planning anything clever, as they finalized their formations and began a steady march towards the fort.

Their blue tabards, cloaks, robes, and flags with griffin imprints clearly demonstrated their allegiance. Even the demons, undead, and war beasts had some blue trappings or war paint. This was good, because those dryads struggled to tell people apart based on facial features. Something Faehorn found slightly ironic when considering they all looked identical. Keira was the only one with a firm grasp on which of them was which, though that was hardly surprising. She'd spent nearly every waking moment of the past few days with those immature tree spirits, after all.

As for the beastkin's role in the siege, she was to be a coordinator far from the front lines. She was presently nestled somewhere in the trees along with the dryads in question, and it was her job to make sure they stuck to the plan without going berserk. Their trees were bound to suffer some damage, so they might take action on their own if she wasn't around to hold them back. Faehorn suspected the catgirl was just worried about them and wanted to be there to guide them through this turbulent time. His lips curled into a smile as he once again thought she'd make a truly great wife and mother someday, though he kept his opinion to himself.

Such idle thoughts swam around the back of his mind as he watched the steadily approaching enemy force. As expected about half of them were durable close-combat units. The rest were split between magical support, healers, and what was left of their Rogues and Rangers. Faehorn and his scouts may not have been able to do much to stall them over the past week, but had still racked up nearly five hundred confirmed kills all together.

Once the Imperial army passed the three-hundred-meter mark, both sides deployed a number of large-scale magical barriers to protect themselves from long distance attacks. In the Empire's case, they relied on personnel, while the Republic used large barrier-generating magic items built into the fortifications. The latter were stronger and had more MP stored up than the former, but were too large and heavy for the invading force to have them along.

"Archers, at the ready!"

A dozen loud voices rang out among the silence that gripped Fort Yimin, followed by a momentary avalanche of clattering as seven thousand arrows were nocked. Even though it may not have been the main weapon of choice for all of them, the vast majority of elven soldiers had received training in using a longbow and had at least 15 Levels in the Ranger Job. It would be foolish to limit an able-bodied fighter to just close-ranged weaponry, after all.

“Take aim!”

The ones atop the walls lined up their shots, while those on the ground behind them aimed at the sky. Even if their Attributes sucked, even if the power behind their shots was weak, even if their aim was lacking, even if they couldn’t see their intended targets—none of that mattered in a siege. As long as they shot in the general direction of the enemy, they were bound to hit *something*. Admittedly these blind attacks would accomplish very little in the grand scheme of things, but it was better to have them than not.

When the forefront of the enemy vanguard crossed the one-hundred-and-fifty-meter mark, the battle finally began in earnest.

“Loose!”

A sea of arrows flew up into the air, glimmering with various colors as numerous enhancements, Martial Arts, and other effects imbued power into each projectile. They passed effortlessly through the massive one-way barriers around the fort and drew grand arcs through the air before raining down on the approaching Imperial forces. The Imperial Wizards, Priests, and Shamans gritted their teeth as the onslaught of projectiles clashed against their defensive Spells. The outcome was the total deflection of the first volley at the cost of the Casters’ collective MP.

“Loose!”

The second volley came several seconds later, once more filling the air with crackling sparks army as countless arrows smashed into the projected barriers.

“Loose!”

A third volley followed, then a fourth, and a fifth. The repeated strain on the Empire's magic users became apparent as their defenses waned. Of course, the attackers' Rangers and Rogues fired back, but they lacked the firepower to punch through the fort's tougher barriers. Then, on the sixth volley, the protective Spells above the center of the Imperial army caved in. There were numerous sounds like glass shattering the defensive Spells were broken one after the other, and the arrows finally reached the soldiers underneath. They raised their shields, and braced themselves, but still suffered injuries.

Various hit confirmation messages flooded the minds of the Republic troops, signifying the Spells had broken through.

"Faehorn, you're up."

Up in the lower branches of the hylt tree, a certain Comm-crystal relayed the orders that its owner had been waiting for.

"Snipe!"

Immediately after, his spectral arrow shot forward like a beam of light, instantly piercing one of the Empire's Priests through the head. Hundreds of similar blue streaks of light flew out of the surrounding canopy, targeting physically weak magic users. The soldiers in front attempted to cover for their comrades using their shields and various Skills, but the high angle of the attacks rendered most of their efforts moot. A number of the robe-wearing twinkle-fingers resorted to quite literally crawling between the armored grunts' legs.

"Snipe! Snipe! Snipe! Snipe! Snipe!"

Even that seemingly cowardly act wouldn't save them from the stream of arrows flowing from Faehorn's 'nest.' Snipe was a Martial Art that imbued a Ranger's shots with immense penetrative power and speed. As expected of a Level 100 wielding an Artifact-grade bow, his attacks punched clean through shields, armor and people as if they were paper. He also took potshots at the VIPs, but their defenses were far more formidable.

The Imperial army suffered casualties, but endured as the distance between them and the walls shortened to about sixty meters. Meteorites of fire,

comets of ice, and solidified lumps of darkness rained down from the heavens on both sides as their Pyromancers, Cryomancers, Wizards and Warlocks traded long-range Spells. The fort's barriers deflected all of the invaders' magic while the attacking force's unevenly distributed defenses only blocked about half of them, resulting in heavy damage to the Imperial infantry.

The Republic was definitely ahead in this early exchange since they had the fortified position, but it wouldn't last for long. Siege weapons were completed with dizzying speed at the far back of the Imperial formation. These unleashed a barrage of enchanted stones that slammed heavily against the fort's magical defenses, then burst into shockwaves of thunderous force that rattled the bones and shook the soul. The repeated onslaught caused large cracks to spread through the bubble-like shields, a sign they were about to break. The fervent exchanges of arrows and Spells hadn't yet ceased, but the Empire's foot soldiers had reached the base of the walls all the same.

While all of that was going on, a certain cat-eared beastkin sat cross-legged amidst a mess of bark and lives with five child-like dryads huddled around her. The three of them closest to the invading force gritted their teeth, as their exposed trunks received damage from a myriad of sources. Of course, they would be hit. They were the quite literal cornerstones of the base's fortifications, so it was only natural the Empire's attacks would affect them even if they weren't the focus of the offensive.

"Mummy… It's itchy…" one of them whined.

"I know, sweetie," Keira comforted her. "Please bear with it a while longer."

Although they appeared as 'just giant trees' at first glance, hylt trunks were actually far, far sturdier than any stone walls or magical barriers. The dryads still the felt arrows, Spells, and stones crashing against their Ironbark, but it was only at the stage of irritation and itchiness. They probably didn't even take any actual damage. If this was all there was to the Empire's offensive, then it wouldn't have been enough to rouse the quintuplets from their slumber had they not been awakened by the Authority.

The blue crystal cube in Keira hands lit up, and she answered it to find herself staring at the projected image of Vera, the Prefect in charge of Fort Yimin.

“Decanus, begin phase one,” the officer ordered.

“Yes, ma’am,” Keira saluted, then turned to the dryads. “Alright, girls. It’s time to play ‘Catch’ with the blue people!”

“Yaaay!” the dryads cried out in unison.

Far below them, on the ground within the Fort’s walls, was a freshly planted grove of young hylt trees with a myriad of large stones and rocks strewn around them. The five-meter-tall seedlings began moving and bending like clay as their trunks and branches creaked. The elves immediately cleared the area and got out of the way. The trees bent over and grasped at the rocks with their branches as if they were gigantic hands and fingers. The saplings flung those stones and boulders into the air with enough force to very nearly uproot themselves. Their haphazard trajectories easily cleared the walls and rained down on the Empire’s unsuspecting troops, injuring or killing hundreds of them in the first volley.

A squad of Druids within the so-called Catapult Garden quickly used their magic to heal the disturbed soil and revitalize the young trees, which bent over and repeated the process. This phenomenon was possible because of Control Vegetation—a dryad-exclusive Skill that served as their main form of offense. It wasn’t just their own bodies, but pretty much any non-sentient plant within their roots’ reach that could bend to their will. Considering an ancient hylt tree’s root system could span kilometers in every direction, it went without saying that the entirety of Fort Yimin fell within their range.

Back outside the walls, the Empire was steadily gaining ground. A large number of the barriers protecting the defenders had shattered, and the Republic soldiers had to deploy their own magical defenses. The invading army pretty much crashed against the thick, ten-meter-tall stone walls like a battering ram. Those at the front were already busy attacking the enchanted fortification using maces and warhammers, while powerful Spells crashed against its surface overhead. Even if it was little by little, they steadily chipped away at the fortifications.

Of course, the Republic would not let them have their way so easily.

“Alright, boys,” Fizzy’s metallic voice rang out. “I think those meatbags outside need a bath!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

A dedicated squad of siege engineers replied in unison as they began ferrying pots of boiling oil up the stairs and onto the walls. The elves already up on the ramparts made way for them, and the scalding mixture was dumped onto the soldiers below. The cries of pain rose up from their ranks as proof of the oil’s effectiveness, but that was only the first step. With practiced ease, the siege engineers took a number of stick-like bombs out of their pockets and pouches, pulled the pins, and threw them over the edge. The metal tubes burst open not with explosive force, but bright yellow flames. The alchemically-prepared boiling oil below caught fire, enveloping the base of the walls in a raging, persistent inferno. Heavy brown smoke rose from the flames and lingered around the area like a thick smog, choking the life out of anything that still drew breath.

Artificers and Alchemists both made nasty stuff on their own, but the combination of the former’s ingenuity and the latter’s deadly chemicals was truly gruesome.

Just then, a plume of bright, blue light radiated from somewhere within the Empire’s ranks. The man known as the ‘Loose Cannon’ was charging his signature move. The Republic forces launched attacks at him to interrupt it, but the Empire’s magic users converged around him to provide cover. It was a tense few moments, but the attackers’ efforts proved enough.

“Particle Cannon!”

A conical beam of pure energy shot out from the man and flew the walls of Fort Yimin at near-light speed.

“Mirror of Calandra!”

Split seconds before it hit, a gigantic, oval-shaped, ornamental mirror sprang up in front of the walls. The beam bounced off it, and washed over that section of the Empire’s force. It scorched the ground, and turned hundreds of the invaders to ash within the blink of an eye.

[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Slayer of Humanity.]

This was the only noteworthy message amidst the flood of notifications that assailed Imiryl's consciousness. The power of the ascendant human's Particle Cannon had been reflected by that of the high elf's own Ultimate Skill. The 'Loose Cannon' himself had been caught up in the attack, though he barely managed to survive. The two high-Level Wizards glared at each other across the momentarily-silenced battlefield.

"Tsk," Lerion clicked his tongue. "I wasn't told *that* bitch would be there."

Had he known, he wouldn't have thoughtlessly used his Ultimate Skill like that. Not only were most of his direct subordinates dead, but his MP was nearly exhausted and his HP wasn't in great shape, either. This seemed to be a good point for him to fall back and recuperate. No matter how weak or powerful they were, any individual on this world would be able to heal from their non-crippling injuries and return to battle after a ten-to-fifteen-minute rest. This time could be cut even shorter with the aid of restorative magic and elixirs. The injured troops still wouldn't be able to use any powerful Skills that had excessively long cooldown periods and had to manage their stamina, but for the most part they could get right back to the fight.

None of that was relevant to the ascendant Wizard, however, as a spectral arrow bore a hole clean through his heart. A second one pierced his skull before his body had even hit the ground.

"Confirmed kill on Lerion," Faehorn reported from his perch.

"Good work," Underwood replied.

"Thank Imiryl if you have time to blab, Silus."

If it hadn't been for the high elf's perfectly executed counter-Ultimate, bringing that man down would have been a much more difficult task. Breaching his Mana Shield alone would have taken far too much time for a lone Ranger, even one of Faehorn's level.

"Heads up, the Hallowed Dead are encroaching on the walls," the archer reported.

“Can you take that Necromancer out?”

“Not a chance. He’s been using his minions as shields, and they’re too hardy for me to... Wait, he’s personally going to the base of the wall!”

A magic user who willingly threw himself into the front lines like that could only mean one thing—he was about to unleash an Ultimate Skill. Since this man’s ability was unknown, it immediately sent the elven officers into high alert. However, they were unable to pass orders down the chain of command fast enough for the defenders to react, and the white-robed man reached the foot of the stone wall unharmed.

The alchemical fires and poisonous fumes that had been started by the fort’s defenders had already subsided or been cleared away. The Empire’s soldiers were wary of approaching this section of the wall again, so the corpse-commander had no cover from the army. He didn’t need it though. The man’s towering death knights used their huge shields to form a mobile bunker around their master, sheltering him from the rain of attacks that came from above. Although he lost about a quarter of his minions getting this far, he reached his goal without much difficulty.

He raised his right arm and placed a pale hand on the chipped, battered, and scorched surface of the walls. He then let out a low voice, almost like a whisper.

“The goal of all life is death.”

In the next instant, everything within fifteen meters of him died. It wasn’t just the elves within range of his Ultimate Skill, either. Even things that were not technically alive were granted ‘death.’ Armor and weapons eroded into oblivion while the ground and stone around him turned to sand. Even part of his own undead platoon succumbed to the effects of the Ultimate Skill and collapsed into inanimate piles of ashes. The very air became stagnant with anti-life to the point that even the person that brought about this world of ultimate decay started to choke on it.

The Necromancer, who was not completely exempt from the effects of his own ability, collapsed to one knee. The death knights left just outside the range of his Ultimate Skill ran to his side to provide cover. He heard

thumping and clanging noises overhead, as numerous attacks bounced off their heavy shields and armor.

“Owww! That! Hurt!”

In the next instant, he heard a high-pitched, childish voice that sent him on high alert. It was clearly audible over the chaotic noise of the battle around him, but he neither saw nor felt any nearby living beings. He quickly dismissed those words as the enemy using some kind of trickery to unsettle him. Rangers, for instance, commonly used Whisper Wind to distract an enemy during combat, the experienced Necromancer wouldn’t fall for such a basic ruse.

He stood unsteadily, using his staff to support his weakened body. Looking up from the sandy ground and peering through the gaps between his minions, he confirmed that the walls before him had collapsed to leave a gigantic, gaping hole in the fort’s defenses. He smiled under his mask, as his mission had been completed. With his part in the battle over, all that was left was to fall back from the front lines, collect his pay, and gather new ‘recruits’ from the soldiers that signed their bodies over to him. It wasn’t difficult to find military types who preferred to have their remains continue to serve the Empire rather than being left to rot in the ground.

However, the Holy Necromancer would have to actually make it back to safety before he could cash in on his ‘investment.’

“GRAH!”

The man let out a shrill yell in response to the sudden sharp pain in both his feet. Looking down in a panic, he saw something had pierced clean through them from below, effectively nailing him to this spot. How was such a thing possible? Everything underneath his position should have turned to ash and sand. Whatever traps the elves might have laid should have ceased to function, regardless of the magic they might have held. Even high-Level monsters would wither away unless they were practically overflowing with vitality.

“Hack! Koff!”

The man's high-speed thought processes cut off as he coughed, gasping for air. He felt weak and dizzy, far worse than the after-effects of Final Goal, his Ultimate Skill, should have been. His limbs felt cold and his body grew heavy as he realized both his HP and MP were rapidly dropping. Whatever had pierced his feet sucked the blood straight out of him, leaving the man without the strength to free himself.

In a fit of calculated panic, he mentally commanded his death knights to cut off his legs at the knees, which they did without hesitation. The man stifled the screams of pain as their ivory blades cleaved through his lower limbs. Separated from his feet, he fell over backwards into the waiting hands of his Hallowed Dead, who carried him away with all due haste. He reached for the Rejuvenating Potion on his belt. It was a high-class mixture that could be called the ultimate healing elixir. It was powerful enough to fully restoring a living being to pristine condition in seconds, including growing back lost limbs. Its main downside was that a single dose would shave off several years from one's natural lifespan, but the Necromancer didn't hesitate to bring the mixture to his lips.

Moments later, the ivory-colored troop of death knights crumbled into piles of dust and bones, which blended into the yellow sand underneath. However, their master was nowhere to be found. All that was left of him were a pair of pierced shoes, a white robe stained red, and a trail of bloodied sand connecting the two points. An uncorked crystal vial lay on the ground, its pink contents draining away into the sand. It was as if the man's body had disappeared into thin air.

It was the price he paid for carelessly harming a dryad's precious roots.

Part Two

“Morgana! Did those dryads make a move just now?”

The angry visage of Prefect Vera stared accusingly at the Comm-crystal’s image of the beastkin who was supposed to keep those ‘children’ in check. She saw the girl turn her head around and heard her repeat the question. The redhead seemingly got her answer, as she turned her attention back to the elf.

“Uhm… Castelia says she got upset and drank the man that hurt her roots.”

Vera blinked a few times in surprise. She could immediately understand how the Necromancer’s large-scale attack might have caused the dryad to retaliate on reflex. That much was obvious. It was that other bit that confused her.

“Drank?” Vera asked incredulously.

“Yes, ma’am. Something about nutrients?”

“So, she… absorbed his body while leaving nothing behind?”

“I think so. She’s not very good at explaining things.”

“I see… Well, uh, we likely haven’t been found out, but make sure you keep them in line, okay?”

Even Faehorn, who had just reported on the Necromancer’s mysterious disappearance, failed to see what went on with all the undead covering that VIP’s retreat. It was therefore safe to assume the Empire’s spotters were just as dumbfounded.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The Prefect cut the connection and returned to the problem at hand. While losing two of their trump cards this early had definitely been a heavy blow for the Empire, they still managed to penetrate the fortress defenses much sooner than anticipated. The Republic planned to wear the enemy down a lot more before that happened, but that was just how powerful Ultimate Skills were. If applied correctly they could drastically change the course of an entire war, let alone a single battle.

The upside was that Operation Honeytrap involved letting the enemy pour into the fort anyway, though the Republic couldn't just open the gates and let them in. The invaders needed to remain oblivious to the nature of the nasty surprise the defenders had in store for them. This meant the Legionnaires and conscripts had to clash with the Imperials head on. Many Republic troops would doubtlessly perish, but as Faehorn had pointed out time and again, the dryads would only be effective so long as they remained an unknown factor. The elves had only one shot at this, so they had to make it count, even if it meant sacrificing their people.

Back at the breached-wall-turned-desert, the Imperial officers considered whether it was safe to rush in. The life-sapping air had cleared up, but the Necromancer that caused it was nowhere to be seen. Although they found the latter to be quite unsettling, the lack of knowledge wasn't going to get them any war contributions. Having two of their living weapons eliminated so soon was unfortunate, but the attackers definitely had the upper hand. VIPs aside, casualties on both sides seemed to be relatively equal thus far. This was good news for the numerically superior Empire. Even if the defenders had a more favorable position, the invaders' superior military would clearly win out.

Seeing little reason to hesitate, the order was given and the Imperial troops rushed over the dried-up sands and through the crumbled section of the wall. As they were about to pour in, however, they met resistance.

"Grit yer teeth and say yer prayers, ye blithering gomerels!"

Angry, inebriated, heavily armed, dwarf-shaped resistance.

"RRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!"

Hilda gave a war cry that carried clearly across the noisy battlefield, and everyone that heard it felt its effects.

[Your body trembles before the Tempest of Rage.]
[The effectiveness of physical Attributes is reduced by 25% for the next 15 minutes.]

The invading infantry felt rattled down to their very cores. Their movements grew noticeably more sluggish, as each individual felt both

their equipment and their breathing grow heavier. Suddenly losing a quarter of the benefits bestowed to them by their STR, DEX, AGI, and END rendered the vanguard confused and shaken on top of being severely weakened.

[The Tempest of Rage has swallowed you up.]
[The effectiveness of physical Attributes is increased by 25% for the next 15 minutes.]

The Republic's forces, on the other hand, let off a unified war cry as they felt their bodies well up with power. Elves, humans, and dwarves clad in shining silverite armor rushed out to meet the Empire's charge, their eyes glowing with an unearthly red light. Tight at their head was Hilda, whose blue tabard had been dyed white just for the occasion. She leapt a good ten meters through the air and swung down with a massive axe taller than her.

"Cleave!"

The blade collided with the ground, sending out a shockwave of red light that dug a five-meter-long trench through it. Needless to say, any humans who stood in its path found themselves slain without being able to do anything about it. Hilda didn't even bat an eye under her spiked helmet. She merely lifted the weapon up onto her shoulder with one hand, and dashed forward, swinging it in a wide arc. Multiple men fell by the wayside every time her weapon moved, the bloodthirsty blade cutting clean flesh, bone, and metal alike. She kept forcing her way deeper into the Empire's ranks like a blender as she let the red haze overtake her. No steel weapon could reach her, but Spells and various projectiles flew at her and chipped away at her formidable vitality.

However, inflicting damage on a Berserker simply made them more dangerous. This sort of environment was where the Job truly shone. To make matters worse for her enemy, the magic weapon Hilda wielded replenished her lost vitality by absorbing the lifeblood of its victims, turning the dwarf into a perpetual carousel of death. The sheer terror her blood-soaked form inspired could not be understated. Even the allies following in her wake trembled at the thought of even getting near her.

Well, all except one of them.

“Heaaaaahahahaaa!”

An oddly gleeful cry came out from a small, mithril frame. Fizzy had decided to take this chance to further advance her Metal Golem and Paladin Jobs. Though her metallic constitution seemed to exclude her from receiving the benefits of the Tempest of Rage, she would not fail to teach these canned meatbags just how inferior they were to her. For once, it wasn’t just her narcissistic tendencies talking.

“Get out there and score some points with the military, but retreat the instant your survival is at stake.”

Those had been the orders given to her by her Hero, and she would follow them to the letter. The humans stood little chance in close combat against a mithril golem that was faster, stronger, and tougher. Her small size made it difficult to target her as she bashed the people around her into a bloody pulp from the ground up. Knees were smashed, spines were crushed, heads were squished, and groins were mercilessly targeted by her trusty wrench. She was entirely within her element—a Champion of Chaos navigating a sea of violence and slaughter.

As she did so, Fizzy began to somewhat understand why Boxxy liked killing humans so much. There was just something… *special* about it. Maybe it was that subtly unique way their skulls caved in, or maybe that they were responsible for turning her former life into a nightmare. Perhaps it was the fact that there were just so many of them to barrel through. Whatever the case, there was no denying that personally taking part in this battle filled her with a thrill that fighting prisoners and monsters in the arena couldn’t compete with.

Still, the radiant construct was careful to not let herself get carried away. Sure, she had her fun, but made sure not to go as deep into enemy lines as Hilda was. Her shiny frame would make her too much of a target. For the first time in weeks the Paladin resisted the urge to show off and blended in with the rank and file as much as she could. Fizzy might’ve made a name for herself in the arena circuit, but out here she was just another of the thousands of Republic troops doing their part to defend their homeland.

She was aided in this endeavor by the way the situation rapidly deteriorated into an all-out brawl. Combatants fell on both sides as Spells and arrows flew over and between them. The counterattack the Republic launched would only last as long as Hilda's Ultimate Skill persisted. Ultimately it was nothing more than a smoke screen that allowed the defenders to inflict the most damage while suffering the least casualties before pulling back.

The question was, whether or not that dwarf actually planned to pull back. The way she pushed forward made one think she had no intention doing so. She kept cleaving her way deeper into the Empire's ranks as if she planned on single-handedly slaughtering every single one of them. Looking at the trail of carnage she left in her wake made it seem like she was entirely capable of doing just that. Unless, of course, someone of comparable strength stood in her way.

CLANGGG

A clear, gong-like sound rang out, and the dwarf was blown several meters backwards. She landed on her feet and skidded across the blood-soaked ground as she came to a stop several steps from her previous position. Her dented helmet landed somewhere behind her with a dull sound as she shook her now-exposed head to recover from the unexpected blow.

"Gah! Got blood-drunk again, didn't I?" she grumbled as she took in her surroundings.

Going 'full Berserker' turned one into a force to be reckoned with, but it also made them lose sight of their surroundings. This was how Hilda found herself neck-deep in Imperial territory, far away from the walls of Fort Yimin and with enemy soldiers surrounding her. None of them seemed keen to approach her, despite having their weapons drawn and trained on her, forming a circle a few dozen meters wide. The reason they had suddenly stopped dead was to avoid getting in the way of a certain someone that actually had a chance at stopping the dwarf's rampage for good.

A certain someone that Hilda was surprised, delighted, and enraged to see.

The one who had just knocked her helmet off was the mysterious, lightly-armored VIP Faehorn spotted earlier. Her ashen leather armor was covered by a bright blue tabard with a golden handprint on her left shoulder. In her

hands was a black plain-looking metal staff with gilded decorations on either end. Attached to her back were a pair of ethereal angelic wings, similar yet subtly different from Lichter's, which beat slowly as she hovered slightly above the ground. The hood that obscured her features before was lowered to reveal a beautiful yet cold expression befitting of an ice queen, framed by shoulder-length, raven-black hair that fluttered slightly in the breeze kicked up by her wings.

It was a look the dwarf was intimately familiar with.

"Well, butter my butt and call me a biscuit!" she smiled fiercely in her fighting stance. "How ye been, Jen?"

The woman planted her feet on the ground as her glowing wings disappeared.

"Hilda," she said flatly.

"Fancy seein' ye here. Had a feelin' ye didn't bite the big one like I heard, but didn't think ye'd turn military!"

The angelic woman didn't reply, but merely assumed her own stance. She stood on one leg, her other raised and bent at the knee. She gripped her staff with her left hand and held it behind her back while extending her right palm forward and upward, as if asking for a cup of sugar.

"Cold as usual, aye?" the dwarf continued. "Still, cannae wait to see Shoestrap's face when he finds out ye're still kickin'!"

In the next instant, Jen shifted a few centimeters to her left, and a phantasmal arrow pierced through the space her forehead occupied mere moments prior.

"Ah… Too late for that, eh?"

Several more arrows flew at her, but she idly plucked them out of the air, catching the projectiles between their fingers. Monk were infamous for their ability to handle projectile attacks with ease, and this one was so advanced that Faehorn's bow seemed useless against her. Still, the elf Ranger wouldn't be himself if he didn't test his old comrade.

Both Faehorn and Hilda instantly recognized this woman as Jennifer Jackson, who used to be a member of their adventuring team along with Lichter the Paladin. She had left them after a particularly bad falling out decades ago, yet looked exactly the same. This was due to her Timeless Body, a high-Level Monk Skill that, among other things, allowed her to retain her youthful vigor and appearance despite her advanced age.

“What’s with the fancy mark on yer shoulder? Ye a big shot or somethin’ over there? Knew ye had it in ye, ye fucken’ psycho!”

The woman blushed slightly in response despite her unflinching expression, showing she was still both immune to sarcasm and weak to compliments.

“C’mon, Jen! Ye must be at least a lil’ happy to see me, right?”

“Jennifer is dead,” spoke the woman in a deadpan voice. “I am Zone of the Gilded Hand. Nothing more. Nothing less.”

“Ah, they even gave ye a fancy codename, eh? Well, then ‘Zone,’ let’s see if ye can still swing that stick around as well as ye used to!”

Hilda leapt forward, swinging her unreasonably sized axe in a wide diagonal arc. Her opponent didn’t even flinch as she struck it with her staff, knocking the heavy lump of metal off-course and causing it to dig into the ground. She swung her fist around, aiming at Hilda’s head. The dwarf raised her shoulder, deflecting the blow with her armor while she pulled back her weapon. She swung it once more, but the Monk leapt over and brought her staff down on her head, which was barely deflected by the haft of Hilda’s axe. The dwarf pushed against that staff with all her might, intending to drive her axe’s blade into Zone’s neck at near-point-blank range. Her target unfurled her wings and retreated into the sky before that happened. She flapped her feathers a few times to gain some altitude before swooping in with a sweep of her staff. It was the same attack that had taken Hilda’s helmet off, except the now-in-control Berserker sidestepped it with minimal movements. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Zone deflect another barrage from Faehorn with little difficulty.

“Damn,” cursed the Ranger under his breath. “It really is her, isn’t it?”

Back on his perch, the high elf did his best to cover Hilda's reckless advance by picking off the enemy magic users targeting her. And then *that* problem child showed up. The woman he knew as Jennifer had grown immensely in the years since they had last seen her, but that troublesome personality of hers seemed to still be intact. The fact she managed to Rank Up in that time frame was nothing short of impressive, which made a part of him happy for his old ally.

No, *former* ally. Whatever their relationship might have been before, she was now an enemy. Come to think of it, she was most likely the one who had saved those griffins from his arrows following the hillside ambush about a week ago. Only a Monk could be that adept at nullifying a Ranger's attacks, and Jennifer was clearly among the best of them. Still, that didn't mean she had the luxury to deflect his arrows *and* go toe-to-toe with Hilda at the same time. She wouldn't stand a chance so long as he provided covering fire while his partner on the ground did her thing.

Unfortunately, there was a lot more going on than three veteran adventurers beating the crap out of each other. Faehorn saw the Comm-crystal at his feet light up, indicating that Silus was trying to get in touch with him. The Ranger hesitated for a moment, but he still answered it with one hand while keeping a trained eye on Hilda and Jennifer's duel.

"What is it, Silus?"

"We have trouble," the officer stated urgently. "Air units coming in from the south. We need you to handle it."

It wasn't a direction the Ranger had a line of sight on. The enemy was assaulting the fort from the west and he was currently on a north-facing branch. As such, there was a colossal tree trunk between himself and those new targets. He would have to relocate, and that would take time that Hilda might not have.

"Can it wait?" the Ranger asked hopefully.

"No, it really can't."

Of course, it couldn't. The fact that Underwood was contacting him meant it must have been a threat that nobody else could handle. Faehorn sighed

and decided to trust that wrecking ball of a dwarf to handle things on her own. At least until he was done dealing with this new situation.

“Alright, I’m on it.”

The Ranger put the blue cube away in his pocket and ran along the sheer side of the hylt tree. He kicked off its surface and grabbed onto a vine dangling from above. He used his momentum to swing over to the next vine, and then the next as he made his way around the side of the massive trunk. He relocated to another branch, this one a bit lower in altitude, which gave him a good view of both the battle and the approaching threat.

“You gotta be shitting me,” he mumbled under his breath.

‘Aerial units’ was Silus putting it lightly. The six griffins he saw were one thing, but their lead flier was a different story entirely. It was a gigantic creature that was several sizes bigger than the others. It had a long neck and tail, a massive torso with four legs ending in claws, and a pair of ridiculously large, leathery wings. Its entire body was covered in shining green scales and it had thick black spikes running down the length of its spine.

“What’s a freaking dragon doing here?!’” he screamed at nobody in particular.

His eyes gave him the answer to that frustrating question. There was someone riding atop the mighty beast. A stocky figure wrapped in brown furs and a pair of goggles to shield him from the wind. The massive black beard that flowing from his chin fluttered around either side of his neck, making it quite obvious as to who he was. Well, it was the thing that he was riding that really gave it away, but that was beside the point.

“Uh, Silus,” he reported into the Comm-crystal. “That’s Thorgren the ‘Dragon Tamer,’ isn’t it?”

One of the few Monster Tamers to reach Level 100, and the only person in recent history who was able to fully control the prideful creatures that stood at the pinnacle of the monster world. Having to face a dragon was bad enough, but a creature under a Monster Tamer’s control was always stronger than a wild one. The added direction and cunning of an

experienced adventurer made them tricky to bring down. The only consolation was the tiny size of the dragon's horns showed it was still juvenile.

"Can you take him?" Underwood asked curtly.

"What, by myself? Where's Imiryl?"

"She's engaging the Black Tower on the field. She's trying to keep him from activating his Ultimate Skill."

Faehorn scanned the ground and immediately located the site of their battle. They were just under the walls, immediately south of where the sandy hole was. The two of them exchanged lightning Spells with great intensity, and were evenly matched. The Black Tower appeared to be quite adept at magic, despite his intimidating frame and bulging muscles.

"So, can you do it or not?" Silus insisted.

"Not a chance. I don't have nearly enough MP to kill a dragon, let alone one controlled by a Monster Tamer."

"So, if you had the MP, you could do it?"

"Maybe, but I'll get potion sickness before that happens."

The Ranger never could handle alchemical supplements. He could only drink three or four potions a day before the debilitating condition settled in, and he had already used two of them.

"Good enough. Standby."

Underwood's image disappeared, even though the Comm-crystal was still active.

"What do you mean 'good enough?' Silus?!" Faehorn shouted.

"Hey, mister."

"Ack!"

A green girl's head with hair-like grass poked out of the branch he stood on, almost literally between his legs. It caused him to let out an uncharacteristic scream of surprise as he instinctively leapt back a few steps.

“Ah, uhm… C-Castelia, right?”

“Yep! Mummy says you need some food, so here you go!”

A number of leafy blue vines sprouted from around the elf and grew straight upwards, then wrapped themselves around his waist. The Ranger had no idea what was going on, but this was clearly part of Underwood’s plan so he let the little plant lady do what she willed. He then felt something flowing into him. Looking at his Status, he saw his nearly-depleted MP recovering at a mind-boggling rate.

“Oh, I see,” his face lit up. “Clever, very clever.”

If dryads could suck the mana out of living things, then it was only natural they could return it as well. However, the influx of energy didn’t stop when it hit maximum, and his current MP went over his capacity. The over-abundance of magical energy in his body caused his joints to tense up, his temple to throb, and his chest to burn painfully. The magical energy would likely kill him if this carried on. The difference between medicine and poison was in the dosage, after all.

“Uh, could you tone it down a bi... Wait, where’d she go?!”

The dryad, it would seem, had already departed. Like it or not, Faehorn had the MP he wanted. Now, he just had to make sure he spent it all before it made his heart explode. Worst case scenario, he’d just cut off the vines with the dagger on his belt. Doing so would probably piss the dryad off a little, but he had a feeling she wouldn’t exactly stop ‘feeding’ him on her own. Based on what he’d heard, restraint wasn’t a virtue that dryads possessed.

Without waiting for his symptoms to get any worse, the high elf went down on one knee and leveled his bow against the targets in the distance.

“Hunter’s Mark. Strafe. Wind-imbued Arrows. Deadshot. Adrenaline Rush.”

He activated numerous Skills in rapid succession from both his Ranger and Rogue Jobs, and then took a deep breath.

“Turret Stance: Snipe!”

The pain in his limbs and head gradually went away as he started spending his overabundant MP. His hands moved at a speed that would be difficult for anyone to follow, turning into blurs as they repeatedly pulled back and released the bowstring. The weapon, his body, and even the branch under his feet shook violently from the excessively-rapid fire clocking at about two hundred shots per minute.

He first targeted the dragon, hitting it in the snout with a dozen arrows before it could react by weaving and dodging. Once the enemy knew they were under fire, he changed targets to the six griffins. Those were shot down in as little as twenty seconds and fell to the ground resembling gigantic pincushions. He turned his aim back to the approaching dragon and kept the constant stream of blue lights trained on it.

As expected, however, he wasn't doing much. The dragon bobbed and weaved at a speed that belied its large body, making it excessively difficult to land clean hits on it. At least half the shots missed completely, while those that hit mostly bounced harmlessly off its tough scales. Trying to target the dwarf strapped to his back proved to be a futile effort, as the spikes along the beast's spine served to give him a surprisingly good amount of cover. The dragon's movements were also highly chaotic, making it impossible to nail the relatively tiny owner at this distance. Besides, the dwarf had probably linked his vitality with the monster under his command, meaning either both died, or neither did.

Still, damage steadily accumulated on the great beast as its scales chipped away and its wings filled with tiny holes. The wounds stitched themselves shut with worrying speed, but the beast's regenerative abilities couldn't keep up. If things kept going like this, Faehorn might have actually stood a chance. Unfortunately, the temporary effects of his various Skills started wearing off, and both his rate of fire and accuracy suffered. The burden he put on his body wasn't helping things either. His bones creaked, his hands bled and his muscles screamed. But he didn't stop. He *couldn't* stop.

By this time, a full minute of his barrage had passed, and the dragon was within three hundred meters of his position. Smoke rose from its nostrils as it let out a gigantic ball of green flames aimed directly at the Ranger. He didn't panic, and just kept shooting dead center at the incoming projectile.

The spectral arrows from his bow ploughed through the flames, dispersing the fireball into a far-less dangerous shower of sparks and smoke in a matter of seconds.

Those were precious seconds the Ranger didn't have to spare. He had to bring the beast down before it got close enough to incinerate the fort's defenders, but shortening the distance also allowed Faehorn to change tactics. He ceased the movement of his hands and let out a few ragged breaths. After that much-too-short breather, he adjusted his stance and waited for the dragon's nostrils to flare up again before activating his Ultimate Skill, albeit in a slightly different fashion.

"Turret Stance: Burst Shot!"

Burst Shot was a bow-based Martial Art with relatively low range, high MP consumption, and minimal armor penetration. However, it was the most destructive of the techniques granted by a Ranger's Marksman Skill. As for why Faehorn had chosen this particular Martial Art—it was to exploit one of the dragons' two known weaknesses.

The first was that their muscles were actually disproportionately weak in relation to their bulk. A dragon's physical might was formidable from a person's perspective, but only because of the sheer size and mass difference. If a dragon and a human were in the same weight category, then the latter would be able to overpower it in a contest of raw strength. Of course, even if a human that massive actually existed, the dragon would just back off and burn them to a crisp using their deadliest weapon—their breath attacks.

However, using those was also how they revealed their other key weakness.

A dragon's scales made up one of the toughest natural armors in the world. They deflected both physical and magical attacks with ease, and damaging them was an ordeal in and of itself. The only thing in Faehorn's repertoire that could even scratch them was Snipe, and the most a Burst Shot could do was maybe leave a scorch mark. A dragon's insides, however, were frightfully vulnerable. Obviously, landing an attack from inside the beast was pretty much impossible without getting eaten. Unless, of course, they opened their jaws wide for some other reason.

The green fireball left the dragon's maw just as dozens of red-tinted arrows ploughed into it and lodged themselves into the back of its throat. The sudden jolt of massive pain caused the beast to stop its advance and recoil while grabbing onto its snout with its clawed, webbed fingers. A heartbeat later, the arrows inside its mouth exploded violently, ripping its throat to shreds. The beast let out a piercing howl as it plummeted towards the ground with black smoke coming out of its jaws.

It crashed into the ground with a thundering impact that the elf could feel all the way up on his perch, the beast's final breath exploding into green flames somewhere above him.

"Heh… Hehehehe! HAHAHAHA! Hack! Koff! Koff! Koff!"

Faehorn's victorious celebration was cut short by him coughing up blood. He hadn't realized it, but the MP influx overpowered his expenditure ever since his rate of fire dropped, and his body was starting to suffer for it. He quickly took his knife out and cut away the mana-imbuing vines. He panted heavily and frantically, allowing his body to steadily release the excess MP into the air through uneven breathing. A few moments of hyperventilating calmed him down enough to finally realize that the Comm-crystal at his feet was ringing again.

Not knowing how long it had been doing that, he grasped it as quickly as his bloodied hand would allow and answered it.

"Silus," he smirked, "I got the-"

"You have incoming!"

No sooner had Underwood uttered those words when the exhausted Ranger felt a presence rapidly approaching him. He looked to his right just in time to see something long, thin, and black hurtling towards his face. There was a dull sound as the metal object made contact with his head and sent him flying off the branch. His skull most definitely cracked, and he lost vision in one eye, but he was still able to make two things out as he fell.

One was the winged figure of Jennifer, the one responsible for knocking him off his perch. Though the emotionless mask she wore was new to him, the cold glare in her yellow eyes was all too familiar. The other thing he

noticed was the aftermath of the dragon's last fireball, which he failed to completely diffuse. His lethal assault had thrown off the creature's aim, causing it to bathe the hylt tree's upper canopy in emerald-green flames. He was sure the dryad was in pain right now, as a dragon's flames were capable of scorching anything from existence.

Ah… that poor kid…

Time seemed to slow down as he plummeted, his mind drifting off to the beastkin who would have to deal with the distraught child and keep her in line. The girl that showed more promise than any other student he had ever seen. The girl that suffered far worse than any person should have had to endure. The girl who had the strength of will to smile and seek happiness despite all she'd been through. The girl that was sure to carry on his teachings and his legacy.

Granted, he still had his suspicions that there was something quite off about her, but it was ultimately a good thing that he never learned the truth.

I just know she'll be an incredible mother one day…

It meant that his final thoughts before he hit the ground and lost his life were thoroughly happy.

Part Three

A blood-stained axe swung downward, and a black staff intercepted it. It hit the high-speed attack from the side, causing it to change course and miss its target entirely. Just like before, Zone used that gap to close in and thrust a palm out at Hilda. The dwarf countered it with a punch of her own. Gauntlet clashed against bare skin, yet the noise produced was a metallic clang. Still, Zone lost in the contest of strength and was pushed back, which gave the dwarf enough of a gap to reposition her axe and take a wide vertical swing at her midsection. The Monk leapt backwards to dodge, but the axe still managed to cut a shallow wound across her abdomen, her eyes wide-open in shock at the unexpected speed of the attack.

Zone took a brief moment to reevaluate her opponent as her feet skidded across the ground. The dwarf in front of her was much more dangerous than she initially thought. Or rather, it would be more accurate to say she had underestimated her based on the image from her memories. She knew that even if Hilda was a hothead who rarely considered the consequences of her actions, the old bat's mind was like a steel trap when it came to combat. Although she let her anger run wild at first, she now had full control over it. Hilda honed her supernatural rage into a weapon and was pointing it directly at Zone's neck like an invisible guillotine. That, combined with the Berserker's oxymoronic characteristic of getting stronger as they took damage, only meant the dwarf would become more troublesome as the battle went on.

In direct contrast to her was the Monk. Hers was a Job that required stillness of heart and calmness of mind. It read the opponent's flow and became one with it, like a blade of grass swaying in the wind. However, this dwarf was no mere gust of air, but a raging tornado that threatened to rip out the very soil itself. Her attacks seemed completely random, yet each one was a deadly strike that would most likely be fatal if taken head on. The fact she managed to rend through the human's dragonhide armor with so little resistance was proof enough of that.

In short, Zone had almost instantaneously come to the decision that she could not take Hilda without revealing her trump card.

The human in front of Hilda chanted something under her breath. Her yellow eyes glowed with a serene, cyan light and a swirl of similarly-colored energy enveloped her. It draped around her like a transparent film, a second skin that perfectly matched the contours of her body and her armor. The dwarf's fierce toothy grin—a clear sign that she enjoyed the fight—only grew wider in response. Her opponent had activated some weird Skill, perhaps her Ultimate. There was no way the Berserker wouldn't get even more fired up.

Hilda prepared her axe for another attack, but Zone moved first this time. The Monk dashed forward, spun around and swung her staff downward with all her might. The sharp-eyed Berserker sidestepped the wide swing, which crashed into the hard-packed dirt kicking up a small explosion of dust. The dwarf immediately recognized it as Zone having put all of her power into a single blow. She could already tell from their exchanges that their physical strength was comparable, and she only came out on top because of the added weight of her armor.

However, such a careless move was completely unlike Zone. It was an attack that put her all into offense and left nothing for defense. If she was in the dwarf's class in the Consortium, a performance like that would earn her a harsh reprimand. But this was a battlefield, and the punishment for mistakes like those were one's life. A verdict Hilda executed without hesitation as she sent her axe flying at the Monk's wide-open neck.

A spectral, cyan-colored form bearing Zone's shape leapt out of the Monk's body and swung her version of the black staff upward, perfectly intercepting the horizontal blow and redirecting its path, so it only sliced off a few hairs. The dwarf didn't miss a beat, using her sideways momentum to swing her weapon around with a spin and deliver another blow, even faster than the last one.

When she laid eyes on Zone once more, she saw the Monk swinging her own staff at the dwarf's head. Her spectral self once again leapt out and brilliantly parried the axe while her physical one smashed into the dwarf's left arm, which she had raised in defense. The armor absorbed much of that impact, but the weapon infused with her Ki still sent shockwaves of pain through the Berserker's body. Hilda recoiled slightly, giving time for her

opponent to take another quick swing, which was blocked by the haft of her axe. The dwarf shifted her body forward and kicked out with her stubby leg, only to see a ghostly foot shoot out of the human and intercept her own with a metal clang. Although their power was similar, the dwarf's much heavier body was still able to win out and push Zone away from her, creating some space between them.

With just that much, Hilda could grasp the nature of her former teammate's Ultimate Skill, Spirit Guardian. The dwarf might not have known its name, but her veteran mind quickly deduced its effects. That ghostly presence would automatically deflect incoming attacks, allowing the user to put all her energy into crushing her opponent. It was like fighting two people at the same time, a simultaneous application of one's offense and defense.

Well, two could play it that game.

"Rearm!" chanted the dwarf.

Her massive axe disappeared in a flash of white light, followed by a few other flashes around her body. When the impromptu lightshow ended a few moments later, Hilda was holding a completely different set of armaments. Her right hand clutched a bearded mithril war axe with a long handle, while her left one grasped at a bizarre red-and-yellow-striped mace closer in appearance to a club. It wasn't just her weapons that had changed, either. A small gold-rimmed buckler was securely strapped to her left forearm and her previously-exposed head now sported a bulky helmet. This new headgear was made out of interlocking steel plates and clearly wasn't part of the same set as her bloodied and battered full-plate armor.

Zone's cold glare became razor sharp as she finally realized how that vertically-challenged reckless nutjob became such a refined combatant.

Although an uninitiated mind couldn't spot the subtle differences between them, each melee-focused Job had their way of fighting. A lot of it overlapped, but each of them had their own focus, their own area of expertise. Warriors trained their bodies and endurance. Berserkers honed their fighting spirit. Monks mastered the art of mind over matter. Paladins empowered themselves with divine energies. Rogues sharpened their cunning, and Blade Dancers perfected their motion and rhythm. But the Job

that truly honed one's blade, the one that was focused on the tools of war first and foremost, was the Armsmaster.

An experienced Armsmaster could use every weapon conceivable with an equal degree of mastery and could move in cumbersome plate armor with the finesse of a dancer on a stage. Their Skills maximized the performance of their equipment, amplifying the strength of the various enchantments that a magic item could hold. Their approach to combat was as varied and versatile as all of the different arms and armor at their disposal, and their power scaled in direct proportion to the depth of their pockets.

It was a prestigious occupation that required serious connections to even acquire, let alone utilize fully. So, it was a surprise that Hilda had access to it. The Armsmaster Job was supposed to be a closely-guarded secret of the dwarf-ruled Horkensaft Kingdom. Much like the Spies of the Empire, it was something only available to select, elite individuals who had the trust and respect of the country's leadership. These individuals would, in turn, enter into a life-binding agreement prepared by a high-Level Scribe's Contract Magic Skill, which prevented them from passing the Job onto others under penalty of instant death.

In summary, it was extremely difficult to find an Armsmaster outside of Horkensaft's elite military forces. Yet, the person in front of Zone was undoubtedly one of those. The Rearm Skill that she had shown off was a dead giveaway. It was an Armsmaster's signature ability, allowing one to keep their personal arsenal within a pocket dimension. It was smaller in capacity when compared to an Enchanter's Item Box and only limited to weapons and armor specifically, but allowed the user to instantly change their loadout as the situation demanded.

"Now then," Hilda lowered and widened her stance, "shall we give this a try?"

She dashed forward and swung her newly-equipped axe at Zone. The Spirit Guardian deflected it with ease, while the Monk's physical staff bounced off the dwarf's buckler. The mace in that shielded hand hurtled towards the Monk's head, and while the Spirit Guardian successfully parried, the near simultaneous follow up from the axe on the other side forced Zone to block it with her staff. The bearded axe, however, moved forward at the last

second, causing the shafts of the two weapons to collide. Hilda pulled on her axe with all her might, and the weapon's long, curved blade hooked around the Monk's staff, pulling it and its wielder closer to the Berserker-cum-Armsmaster. The angelic human expertly twisted her staff around and pulled on it to unlatch it from her opponent's weapon. She managed to release it almost immediately, but she still found herself literally face-to-face with Hilda. While the Spirit Guardian kept that heavy mace at bay, the dwarf's armored forehead collided with Zone's. And in doing so, the dwarf set off the impact-sensitive trigger in the helmet Fizzy had custom-made for her.

What followed was a thunderous explosion, the force of which blasted Zone's relatively light body several meters through the air. Her dragonhide armor dulled the impact and protected her body, but her exposed face was left covered in cuts and gashes from the shrapnel. She breathed heavily for the first time since this battle started, possibly also the first time in months. The mind she tried to keep as still and unfeeling as a pond was now rattled and disturbed by the absurdity that was Hilda.

The dwarf, on the other hand, had barely moved from her spot. The remnants of her helmet-shaped bomb fell off her smoldering head, with the only sigh of injury being a fresh trickle of blood running down her temple. Even if it that helmet carried a shaped charge that directed most of the explosive force forward, it was impossible for Hilda to not take damage from it. Her head might have gone missing altogether, if it wasn't for her absurd vitality. The Craggy Skin Skill she had obtained as part of her Rank Up into a stonekin dwarf had also helped. The ability reduced damage taken from nonmagical sources, which included an Artificer's explosive devices.

All in all, Hilda's opponent clearly got the worst part of that blast, but it was the process that led up to it that shook Zone. That fast, compact, and calculated combination of blows were completely unlike the axe-wielding maniac she'd been fighting until then. It was almost the polar opposite of Hilda's natural fighting style, but one far more troublesome to deal with.

The dwarf undoubtedly understood the weakness in Zone's Ultimate Skill. Although the Spirit Guardian could block incoming strikes with all of the Monk's speed, strength, and expertise, it could only focus on one blow at a

time. While huge singular swings were of no concern, it was possible to overwhelm the ethereal entity's defenses with rapid consecutive or simultaneous strikes. Zone herself could handle those well enough on her own, but doing so defeated the purpose of her ghost-self being there. It was a good thing Faehorn had stopped taking potshots at her, otherwise-

The Monk's eyes widened as she recalled that long-ranged threat's existence. The thought reminded her that there was more going on around her than a one-on-one duel. Her tunnel-vision dispersing, Zone finally noticed the Comm-crystal vibrating inside the pouch at the back of her waist. The item had somehow avoided being shattered in the battle and served to remind the Monk of her role in this siege. One that she had completely and utterly failed to fulfill.

Looking up at the tree Faehorn was using as his perch, she saw he was already engaging the incoming aerial reinforcements. Zone was supposed to intercept and shut down the anti-air threat that Ranger posed, providing cover for that dragon-riding mercenary to make his approach. She was clearly not doing that, having been drawn into her own little world where the only things that mattered were herself and her opponent. This habit of hers was a very, *very* bad thing, and also the main reason why Edward loathed to trust her with any mission that was more complex than 'smash the thing.'

Having remembered her actual orders, Zone took advantage of the distance between her and the dwarf and conjured up her angelic wings. Her body soared into the air with a single mighty beat, and she rapidly gained altitude.

"Oy! Where'd ye think yer goin'?!" Hilda yelled from the ground. "I'm not done with ye!"

She tossed several enchanted axes after the ascending Monk, but failed to so much as graze her. In the next instant, the dwarf realized where that woman headed. She fumbled around the pouch on her belt, but found that her own Comm-crystal had not survived the brawl. Must have been that one good kick that 'Jen' had gotten on her earlier. Well, someone was bound to see and report that eyesore of an angel's movements, so Faehorn would just have to deal with her in his own way.

Besides, Hilda didn't exactly have the luxury to worry about other people, as Imperial soldiers still surrounded her on all sides. Her wounds had piled up by now, and her HP was dangerously low. At the very least those humans were hesitant to get near her. The duel unfolding before their eyes was too absurd for any of them to follow, and a few of them had gotten needlessly caught up in it and lost their lives. The dwarf hurriedly Rearmed herself with her favorite oversized axe and glared viciously at those around her, sending them several steps back in fear.

This was the natural response to seeing her bring out that monstrous weapon again, but there was more to it than that. Somewhere along the way, the dwarf had obtained the Slayer of Humanity Perk after having killed more than five hundred of them throughout her lifetime. Its effects on those around her were rather subtle compared to the Butcher tier of a certain chest-minded shapeshifter, but it still amplified her natural 'charm.'

As a result, she got a bit of extra room to catch her breath, but the damage she had sustained so far was quite serious. She counted no less than six bone fractures, felt like the world around he was spinning, couldn't feel her left leg below the knee, and felt a constant, stabbing pain somewhere in her midsection. Her HP was only a third of its original value, and steadily dropping due to internal bleeding. She wouldn't even be standing if not for her stubborn nature and Berserker Skills propping her up. In short, there was a very real chance she might not make it back to the Fort, even if she were to make a beeline for it.

Retreating was indeed something she very much wanted to do. Even if she wasn't the sharpest knife in the drawer, she still had enough common sense to realize how deep in trouble she was. One couldn't make it to Level 100 if they used their head solely as an explosive delivery device. Granted, nobody would make it past Level 1 if they actually did that, but that was beside the point. From where she stood, Hilda recognized the need to retreat and recuperate before another troublesome opponent showed up.

"ORRRRAAAA!"

Just then, a loud yell rang out behind her in the direction of Fort Yimin's besieged walls. She turned around on her heel to see a towering, four-armed, red-skinned demon ploughing her way through the Empire's ranks.

The fiend's steel-clad fists sent Imperial troops flying with every punch, while her armored kicks made them bend over in weird, unnatural shapes. Her bright-green eyes scanned over the heads of her opponents as she rampaged, her stare naturally directed towards the odd gap surrounding Hilda. The two Berserkers momentarily locked eyes, each of them confirming the burning fury within the other's glare.

Locating her target, the towering demon leapt an astounding twenty meters through the air, landing right on the edge of the Empire's encirclement of the dwarf. Her massive weight crushed some poor, unsuspecting soul's skull underfoot, and the surrounding humans immediately made space around her in shock and awe. The blood-splattered, silver-colored cloth tied diagonally across her chest signified her allegiance to the Republic, but the veteran dwarf did not relax in the slightest. This was a natural reaction, as one never knew if a demon on a battlefield was still bound to a master.

The two muscle-heads glared at each other with vicious grins as they confirmed the other's unique brand of wrath. While Hilda's was a fine-tuned, constant burn that could melt through anything, the other party was a raging inferno no mortal could hope to contain. It was sometimes said that the Berserker Job originated from the demon world known as the Beyond, and the being before the dwarf's eyes seemed to be the living testament to that.

"Hah! Hahahaha!" Kora laughed. "That's a good glare you got there, lady! Practically sets my soul ablaze! I love it!"

"Right back at ye, Spiky!" the dwarf humored her. "So, why are ye lookin' around fer lil' ol' me?"

"I'm here to send you flying, of course!" the demon answered with a sharp-toothed grin.

"I see. Well, then should we get started?"

"Yes, let's!"

Hilda positioned her axe's blade behind her and dashed forward with a guttural roar. The fiend in her sights turned her left shoulders and hip forward, as she got ready to meet the charge. Their audience tensed up as

the monstrous dwarf jumped at a high speed and thrust her weapon forward. The demon deftly grabbed the upper part of its shaft, just under the massive blade, and spun her body around like a top. After picking up speed for several revolutions, she let go of the weapon, sending it and its owner soaring through the air.

“Thanks fer the liiiiiiiift!”

The clearly unhinged dwarf’s cheery voice trailed off as she hurtled towards the general direction of the fort. Kora watched with a bemused smile as Hilda was caught in the air by a certain blue-skinned succubus that had draped herself in a silver robe just for the occasion. Well, ‘caught’ was not perhaps the right word, as the dwarf was far too heavy for Xera to do anything of the sort. In the end, all she really did was cushion Hilda’s fall with those massive breasts, and was no doubt moaning creepily after being partially crushed under the armored dwarf’s weight.

“Angry lady retrieval complete, boss!”

Kora reported telepathically back to her Master while giving four thumbs up to nobody in particular.

“Good, very good.”

“You sure you wanna let her get away so easy? We could’ve finished her off, you know.”

“It’s regrettable, but going after her life was too risky.”

Boxxy was able to steal and preserve that Holy Necromancer’s body unnoticed by using the dryad’s root system, but Hilda was another story. She was too far out, too exposed for that to happen without either side noticing its interference. Besides, it seriously doubted that monstrous dwarf would fall that easily just because she was ‘weak.’ A Berserker was at their most dangerous when standing right at death’s door, and that dwarf was plenty lethal even without it. In fact, now that Boxxy thought about it, she was no doubt even more terrifying than Edward the Spymaster when it came to direct combat.

Worse still, even if Arms won, the Republic’s military leadership already knew her and Snack to be the Sandman’s familiars. The Warlock was

responsible for their familiars' actions, meaning the elven government would no longer do business with the masked mercenary if he blatantly attacked their VIP, win or lose. If Boxxy had to choose between getting an obscene amount of shinies or a chance to gain some Warlock Levels quickly, Boxxy would go with the former ten out of ten times. That wasn't even taking into consideration the benefits that Keira's personal connection with Hilda might offer one day.

Simply put, there was more value in helping the dwarven Berserker than trying to kill her.

The Imperial grunts that Arms was currently chest-deep in, though? Those were fair game.

"Anyway, just keep doing like you always do," Boxxy commanded. "And keep an eye out for tasty targets. I'll be coming out in a little while."

"You got it, boss!"

Kora turned her attention to the still-dumbfounded mob around her and clenched all four of her fists hard enough to make her knuckles crack.

"Alright, boys! Who wants to show me a good time?!"

Part Four

“But- But- But- It huuuuuurts!”

“Shhhh. I know, sweetie,” Keira whispered, “but you have to try and bear it.”

Castelia desperately clutched the right side of her face and head, curled up on the ground with her head in the redhead’s lap. The young dryad’s features were charred black and gave off a faint stream of smoke. One could easily see the dull-red embers on her cheeks, which ran all the way down to her shoulder. Keira gently stroked the distraught child’s hair-like grass in an attempt to soothe her.

“But it huuurts! Muuuummyyyyy!”

It clearly wasn’t working.

What a pain, Boxxy grumbled internally. *At least this tree isn’t the one that got hit.*

The place Keira and the other dryads occupied was nestled within the crown of Lilly’s tree, who was on the northwestern end of the front. While it was also on the side facing the enemy, Castelia was the one who ended up shouldering the biggest burden.

“Torenia, be a dear and help Castelia out. Lilly too.”

“Do we have to?” replied the two in unison.

“Your sister is in pain. You would want help if you were in pain, right?”

“Y-yes?” they answered sheepishly.

“But how can you expect help if you don’t offer it? It wouldn’t be fair, right?”

“Okay! We’ll help right away, mummy!”

The two of them got closer to their scorched sister and put their hands on her back. Although a plain action, the fact they could do that at all was quite extraordinary considering their biology.

According to Ambrosia, a hylt tree's near-infinite vitality was extremely demanding in terms of sustenance, and those needs only grew as the tree aged. As such, the tree's roots would choke the life out of other plant life, including their own kind, in an increasingly larger area around them. That was why only simpler and more resilient forms of vegetation, such as weeds, grasses, and shrubs, could thrive anywhere near a hylt tree. Even Azurvale's original twelve were considered very densely packed, despite there being literal kilometers between them. Their case was an exception made possible because they could tap into the vast reserves of natural magical energy that ran underneath them. Sometimes called 'ley lines' or 'dragon veins,' these subterranean rivers of mana were ideal energy sources for the ravenous hylt trees, assuming their roots grew deep enough to tap into them.

The hylts at Fort Yimin had none of that. Ambrosia claimed it would be surprising if even two or three of them had survived under these conditions, yet there were five of them. Then there was the fact that their dryads were quite underdeveloped for their age. The way they looked completely identical and acted in total sync with one another only added to the weirdness of their anomalous existence.

As it would appear, the root cause for all of these oddities had been just that —their roots.

At some point during their sapling stage, something caused the five trees' roots to fuse together into one gigantic system. As a result, the quintuplets had apparently shared their food for centuries, albeit subconsciously. It was more accurate to think of them as a single five-headed organism than a collection of separate entities. This would certainly explain all of the deviations at Fort Yimin, though the full extent of the side-effects brought on by this aberrant mutation was unclear.

The connection clearly had its benefits, however. For one thing, the dryads could freely enter each other's trunks, which would normally be impossible even if their trees were close enough for their root systems to overlap. Another benefit, and one that was far more relevant to the current situation, was that they could bolster one another in times of need. Boxxy had no idea what Torenia and Lilly were doing, but it was clearly working. Castelia's

charred skin fell off in smouldering clumps and healthy, vibrant green plant-flesh rapidly grew to replace it.

Considering that a dryad's wellbeing was a reflection of her tree's condition, this meant that some freshly-shed, still-burning branches were likely making life difficult for the people outside.

"Not too much now," Keira cautioned. "Wouldn't want you girls getting too tired before the big surprise."

Torenia and Lilly took their hands off their kin. The right half of the burn victim's face and hair were still somewhat blackened, but at the very least she stopped crying. It was clear the girl was no longer in pain, though she didn't seem too happy with the outcome.

"But-" she tried to protest.

"No buts, Castelia. Your sisters were kind enough to share their food with you, so you be sure to pay them back later."

"Okay, mummy," she whined.

"And?" the redhead crossed her arms demandingly.

"And, uh, t-thanks, Torenia. Thanks, Lilly."

"You're welcome, sis," they smiled in response.

Truthfully speaking, Castelia would have probably been fine on her own. However, Boxxy needed these excitable children as calm and collected as possible before the time came. Speaking of which, the effects of Hilda's Tempest of Rage would dissipate in around five more minutes. The Republic forces caused terrible casualties to the Empire's troops at the moment, but that would only last as long as that dwarf's Ultimate was giving them an edge. They would pull back as soon as it ended, and the mimic-minded shapeshifter wanted its fair share of man-flesh before that happened.

"Now then, mummy needs to step out for a while," Keira stated. "I promise, I'll be back in time for the big surprise or if someone hurts you again. So, stay put and be good until then, okay?"

The dryads seemed disappointed, but still nodded their heads in affirmation. Boxxy gave each of them a peck on their foreheads to cheer them up, and then set out to do what it did best—spread death and misery.

Down on the ground, Kora was still fighting the human troops that rushed her after she gave Hilda a lift. Even if she was a Berserker herself, she was nowhere near that dwarf's level. Not only were the various Skills and effects of her secondary Job far less pronounced, but her fists' reach was nowhere near as wide as that dwarf's inhumane axe. As such, they had been constantly accumulating damage on her. She bled all over the place with a body covered in gashes and riddled with arrows and half her face melted off by magic. Someone had drilled a hole clean through her chest, and she had even lost one of her left arms somewhere along the way.

As one might expect, neither her bloodlust nor her grin had diminished in the slightest.

"C'mere, cupcake!"

The heavily-injured fiend reached out with one of her hands and gripped onto a human soldier's head with enough force to cause both his skull and helmet to creak ominously. He screamed in pain and desperately swung his sword at her arm, but it only bounced helplessly off her gauntlets. Kora then lifted the poor man off his feet and swung him about like a ragdoll, pushing his comrades away with his body. He had gone completely limp by this point, but whether it was because he passed out or passed away was irrelevant, as what was left of him was flung into the path of an oncoming Icy Comet Spell. The two projectiles collided, and the result was something that could only be described as 'dirty fireworks.'

In the next instant, her torso was pierced from behind by three separate spears that went almost halfway through her. The fiend grit her teeth and bent over forward with all her might, delivering a headbutt to the guy directly in front of her and splaying him out on the ground with a dent in his helmet. The soldiers behind her kept a firm grip on their spears and found themselves launched into the air by the sudden motion, as if hurled by a demon-shaped catapult.

"War Stomp!"

The fiend's Martial Art smashed what was left of his head into a pulp, while also cracking the ground around her. The sudden tremors made some of the Empire's troops lose their footing and stumble. Kora picked one such off-balanced target at random and swung both her rights at him. The man put up his shield just in time, but the impact from the double-handed punch lifted him off his feet and threw him several meters into the air. He fell back to the ground, reeling from the pain. His kite shield had two distinct fist-shaped imprints on them, his arm was definitely broken and he dropped his weapon during lift-off, but he was most assuredly alive.

Even if the fiend's ridiculous strength and heavy weight meant she could send people flying with a single punch, that didn't necessarily mean they were done for. In fact, she only killed about thirty, maybe forty people in this entire battle. This bunch were far less shaken and a lot more in control than the ones in that night raid a week or so prior. That, and most of her victims fell back to get treatment while their comrades covered for them. Even if she could toss these goons around all day, it was quite difficult for her to finish them off if they didn't die in the first few hits. That was unlikely to happen considering the quality of their armor and training.

"That's why you shouldn't send them flying, but bury them into the ground instead."

Her master's words of wisdom flashed through Kora's head. She knew that would-be-box was right, but since it was advice rather than order, she hadn't really listened. There was just something immensely satisfying about literally blowing people away, even if it wasn't necessarily fatal. And if there was one thing Kora valued above all else, it was her own enjoyment. Therefore, she pushed away those thoughts of efficiency and charged at her next victim. She curled her biceps to strike, but her master quite literally beat her to the punch.

A gigantic, barrel-chested figure landed on the man in front of her. Well, it landed on a few of them that were bunched up together, but that was beside the point. After using the Empire's soldiers to cushion his fall, he stood up at a height that was almost equal to Kora's. His head was covered by a face wrap that hid all of his features aside from his yellow eyes and the pale skin around them. A heavy flowing cloak concealed the entirety of his body, its

silver color and the image of a black swooping eagle on the back clearly declaring his allegiance.

Just in case him deliberately stomping down on Imperial troops wasn't enough of a hint, the Sandman was quite literally draped in the Ishigar Republic's flag.

"True Darkness!"

His deep voice rang out, and a huge dome of blackness that was a little over twenty meters in diameter covered the field around him. The human soldiers near the edge instinctively retreated. Although True Darkness merely robbed the area around a Warlock of all visible light, that didn't mean it actually did any damage. However, their decision was definitely the right one, as the shrill screams and unpleasant crunching noises heard from within that world of darkness signified it was not a safe place to be.

After several seconds, the lightless bubble went deathly silent. One of the higher-ranking humans gave an order to brace for attack. The soldiers rapidly established a shield wall perimeter several meters away from it while others ran off to fetch aid. The Republic's troops held the line immediately in front of the breached wall, some two hundred meters south of their location. Whoever or whatever that terrifying figure they caught a glimpse of was, it was completely cut off from any hope of reinforcements.

Of course, they didn't know it yet, but they were the ones about to be begging for backup.

A multitude of figures burst out of the darkness before it had a chance to dissipate. Leading the charge as per usual was Kora. Her wounds and missing arm had fully regenerated thanks to a Rejuvenation Potion Boxxy had 'borrowed' from the elves' stockpiles. Using it on an expendable demon was something of a waste, but it wasn't shiny and didn't cost the shapeshifter anything. That and it wouldn't have to spend its MP re-summoning her, which was good.

The fiend stretched her arms out to the side and then swung them forward with all her might.

"Thunderclap!"

Her two pairs of palms met each other with explosive force, producing a powerful, ear-splitting shockwave that swept over the human forces in front of her. The ones closest to her were knocked down to the ground from the sheer force of it, while those around them keeled over while clutching their ears. As expected of a Berserker's Martial Art, it was extremely effective on those weaker than the user. The fiend's unnatural physique had only further amplified its power.

"GRRAAARGH!"

The one that leapt out alongside her was a horse-sized, lizard-like creature made of molten rock, that charged head-first into the Empire's perimeter. Although they might have been able to body-block it under normal conditions, the soldiers were all reeling from Kora's Thunderclap. The cone-shaped shockwave had either thrown their sense of balance out of whack, or had outright ruptured their eardrums. Under those conditions, they could do little to stop the Molten Guardian from trampling over them and literally blazing a trail through their ranks.

The magical construct's owner flew out of the wall of blackness a moment after the first two. Xera's usual fetishistic outfit was transformed into a beautiful silver-colored gown so as to mark her very temporary allegiance. The purely decorative garment was backless, strapless and, as the slit skirt fluttering teasingly between her legs revealed, also underwear-less. The succubus silently entered the area of True Darkness under the effects of Invisibility after her beloved master's grand entrance. She was already sharing the flames of her passion with the Empire's troops. Or, to put it another way, she cackled like a maniac as she burned people alive with a barrage of Fireball, Flamethrower, and Inferno Spells.

Normally the humans would shoot Spells right back at her, but the trained soldiers' hearts were already been broken. First, they had to deal with monstrous dwarf. Then they had to watch out for that winged woman that didn't care if her own comrades got caught up in her battle. Following those was the appearance of that truly terrifying demon. Then that dome of blackness had appeared before they realized what was even going on. They were barely keeping it together as they made a perimeter around it, only to

have that four-armed menace come out fully recovered and accompanied by *even more* creatures of similar strength.

Their breaking point came when the True Darkness Spell dissipated, mere seconds after that dangerous trio revealed themselves. The veil lifted on a scene where the dozen-or-so soldiers that were caught up in the Spell had disappeared. The only traces of them were several puddles of fresh blood and an untold number of bloodied, mangled armor pieces scattered about.

That hadn't been what finally broke the Imperial soldiers' morale. The people outside the circle had given up on the ones caught inside it. Not seeing any corpses actually made the horrible truth a bit easier to swallow. It was the lone figure that stood in the middle of it all that made the high-strung men finally snap under the pressure.

"Huaheuhahuahehahuehahahehaaa!"

Two-and-a-half meters tall, drenched head-to-toe in fresh blood, cackling maniacally with a truly otherworldly voice, and practically exuding the stench of death. The shock of that terrifying sight combined with the effects of both Butcher of Humanity and Despair Aura hit the surrounding humans with full force, breaking wavering hearts and minds. It was at the level where they beat a disorderly, panicked retreat. They ran with all their might, trampling their fallen comrades underfoot and discharging various bodily fluids as they went.

The man, no, the *monster* leapt at their fleeing backs and caught up to them in an instant. It mercilessly ripped them limb from limb with its bare hands, and the few people brave enough to look back would realize that a good number of those severed limbs disappeared somewhere under that cloak. At some point, the incarnation of death chasing them picked up a greatsword off of one of their corpses and did its best Hilda impersonation as it mercilessly hacked through them. Rather than cut people neatly in half like the dwarf's axe, the weakly-enchanted weapon simply crushed them into pulp. It was no longer a blade, but an oddly shaped steel club.

It was still technically a sword, which was more or less exactly what its wielder was after.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 18 Blade Dancer! DEX +2. END +2. STR +1. AGI +1.]

The Sandman charged forward alongside its minions, mercilessly mowing down everyone in sight, like a gardener clearing the weeds (humans) so that the crops (Levels) may grow. The creature reaped quite the bountiful harvest indeed.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 19 Blade Dancer! DEX +2. END +2. STR +1. AGI +1.]

It might have encountered more difficulties if those humans turned around and counter-attacked in an organized fashion, but that was unlikely to happen. Panic and fear could spread like a wildfire, and Boxxy was even more of an arsonist than Snack when it came to matters of psychological warfare.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 48 Warlock! INT +2. MNT +2. END +2.]

Of course, it wasn't just the newly-acquired Blade Dancer Job that steadily gained Levels. The fact it had all three familiars out on the field doing work caused its second-oldest Job to steadily progress as well. And yes, Claws was out here too, although these rank-and-file soldiers had little chance of detecting her presence. She was so good at hiding herself away that her streak of assassinations went unnoticed in all the confusion. The most that her victims might have perceived was a shadow or a blur skitter past the edge of their sights right before she took their heads. Those standing next to the ones killed had no idea who or what had just murdered their comrades, which did not help their delicate states of mind in the slightest.

One could hardly blame them. Even Boxxy had trouble tracking her position sometimes, that was just how adept she was at staying out of sight. It was honestly quite pleased with her performance, to the point where it would be hard pressed to choose between her and Arms as its third favorite minion. Snack was still the absolute tastiest, so she was the undisputed

champion in that category. The runner-up was Fizzy, for entirely different reasons. The shapeshifter thoroughly enjoyed caressing and tongue-polishing her shiny mithril frame head-to-toe whenever it had the chance to. She seemed to somewhat enjoy it too, even though her metal 'skin' didn't have a sense of touch.

Ambrosia was definitely at the bottom of its list, as Boxxy still wasn't quite sure whether that dungeon core could keep her loyalties in check. At least her language lessons improved as of late as she steadily learned how to teach others. The dryad even got ahold of the Mentor Skill somewhere along the way and was diligently practicing her Cooking Skill as instructed, both of which were already at Level 3.

Still, as useful as she was, she was still a potential threat that Boxxy had to treat with a certain amount of care. Well, not *too* much care. Her true nature was that of a monster, so the two of them naturally saw eye-to-eye on most topics despite the dryad being tainted by the influence of an elf-loving goddess. At the very least, Boxxy was sure its lair would be safe, as its experiments revealed she would not forgive intruders in her dungeon, regardless of whether they were elves or not. Though, that particular test was not something the shapeshifter intended to repeat. The state of the hapless adventurers it had 'invited' into the Dryad's Domains had been… less than appetizing.

[Level up!]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 20 Blade Dancer! DEX +2. END +2. STR +1. AGI +1.]

The shapeshifter continued slaughtering people as it let its thoughts stray towards useless things. It was already at the stage where the act of murdering helpless, terrified humans was so routine it could probably do so in its sleep. That was why it could casually navigate its Status and Skill windows as its limbs mechanically took lives. And the reason it did so was because it wanted to unlock a certain Blade Dancer Skill that Keira had been told to look out for.

[Proficiency level increased. Evasion is now Level 1. AGI +3. END +1.]

This one was actually a common Skill that quite a few Jobs had access to, including Rogue and Ranger. Its effects were normally quite subtle in that they assisted the user's movements when it came to dodging and avoiding attacks completely. However, it was a Skill that grew stronger with the more Agility (AGI) one had. Both Boxxy and Keira had that Attribute in spades. Although the shapeshifter was quite good at dodging things already, being able to do so without any wasted movements would let it counterattack more easily. There was far more to an efficient dodge than simply 'moving out of the way' after all.

[Proficiency level increased. Evasion is now Level 3. AGI +6. END +2.]

Like for example, that Shadowbolt Spell it just avoided by ducking under it. It let the mass of darkness pass just over the top of its head. If it had dodged it the way it normally did, then-

Wait, Evasion gained two whole Levels?!

It didn't have time to fully ponder the implications of this sudden development, as Sandman's hulking figure moved with uncanny speed to avoid yet another one of them.

[Proficiency level increased. Evasion is now Level 4. AGI +3. END +1.]

Just how dangerous were those Spells to give it that much Proficiency? The creature leapt back from its position and broke off its pursuit of the fleeing Imperial soldiers. A third Shadowbolt came flying at it from well outside the Spell's standard range of thirty meters, but this one was blocked by Claws. The stalker demon appeared seemingly out of nowhere and used her back-mounted sickle-legs to cut through the incoming projectile well before it reached her master. Arms, Snack and the affectionately-named Smokey also broke off their pursuit and rushed to Boxxy's side.

As the ever-retreating line of Imperial soldiers drew further away, the shapeshifter could finally identify its attacker. It was, of course, a Warlock. A particularly old one at that. Much like Boxxy, he also had three familiars out on the field.

The first one was obviously a fiend—a towering pile of muscle slightly taller than Arms. Unlike her, however, this one was a male with the standard

set of limbs, although his arms were probably twice as thick as they needed to be. His skin was a pale, dull color somewhere between blue and purple, and his legs ended in a pair of thick hooves. His facial features were obscured by a steel-like helmet and the metallic horns that protruded from its sides were very bull-like in their appearance. His left arm, shoulder, hand and leg were encased in shining, thick armor, while the right half of his body was nothing but bare, chiseled muscle. In his right hand, he carried a huge glaive that reminded Boxxy of Overlord Nagnamor, and a pair of tight short shorts hid his groin from view.

The second demon was a hellhound, a massive canine creature that was a size bigger than Smokey the Molten Guardian. It had a wolf-like head that let black smoke out of its nostrils with every breath. Hissing, bright-yellow drool dripped from its growling mouth. The sharp fangs in its jaws and the long claws poking out of its paws went from a dim red at their base to a bright yellow at their tips, as if formed from half-molten steel. Its thick fur was a fitting gray like burnt ash, and flaming eyes made it impossible to tell which way it looked.

The third demon was a green-skinned beholder that looked a lot like the one that ‘Chester Underwood’ had seen back in Bootsplit. What was his name again? Thump-it or something? Regardless, it had the same array of ten tentacle-like eye-stalks coming out of its floating head of a body, all of which were fixed directly onto the Sandman as it levitated over his master’s head.

As for the master in question, he had a marvelous gray beard that went all the way down to his stomach. His body was draped in a plain-looking blue robe while a matching wide-brimmed hat was on his head. His gnarled hand carried a thick wooden staff that looked more like a large stick than a magic item. All in all, the old man’s equipment made him look just like the Level 40 or so magic users in the Empire’s army. However, the fact he was able to stare unflinchingly at the Sandman—a being that should appear as nothing less than terror incarnate to such people—proved he was clearly not one of them.

It took Boxxy a few moments, but it remembered that it had actually seen this man once before. Even if it sometimes struggled with names, the

monster rarely forgot a face, and this particular one had made quite the impression about a month ago. He was one of the people riding that fancy carriage Boxxy had encountered shortly after its Rank Up into a doppelganger. The mysterious nobleman that that the shapeshifter had decided to 'let go' on its way out of the Empire. This was a decision that would soon prove to have been the right one.

"Greetings, mister Underwood," said the old man in a thoroughly excited voice. "My name is Arakawa Shinji, and I-"

CLANG

Boxxy threw a poisoned knife at Shinji while he was running his mouth. Unfortunately for the shapeshifter, the blade bounced off an invisible barrier mere centimeters in front of the startled Warlock's face and fell harmlessly to the ground.

"Okay. See here, I don't-"

CLANG

Something metal bounced off the old man's magical shield again.

"God damn it!" he yelled, clearly frustrated. "Fine, have it-"

In what was becoming a trend, the old man's words were cut off as the rebounded metal orb in the air split open in the next instant.

KAPINNNNN

The Artificer-made flashbang did just as its name implied as it flashed and it banged. One would think a cheap trick like that wouldn't work on a Ranker, but as Boxxy learned firsthand, it was nigh-impossible to overcome certain biological reactions with Status alone. Its own heightened Perception (PER) worked against it when it accidentally activated the Elder Dryad's Authority as Keira. It rolling around on the floor while screaming its lungs out hadn't been an act, but the creature's genuine reaction to the blinding light. It was quite proud of itself for managing to stay in character despite the unexpected and painful occurrence. Therefore, even if its opponent was one of the Empire's VIPs, it was inevitable that Shinji and maybe even the demons around him would have been blinded by that, even if for a little while.

Boxxy used those precious few moments to turn around and run away with all its might.

Part Five

Boxxy wasn't sure exactly what that old Warlock wanted with it, nor did it really care. Its self-preservation instincts kicked up the instant the Ranker identified himself. This was not an opponent it could defeat easily, if at all, so it really had no business even trying. Unfortunately, the monster's instantaneous surprise attack had been thwarted by some form of transparent magical shield. The most likely culprit would be Shinji's beholder familiar, as that sort of thing was one of their specialties. It certainly wasn't a Warlock Skill, since the shapeshifter knew firsthand just how few defensive options the Job offered.

All things considered, the fact it failed to remotely stab Shinji in the face wasn't entirely unexpected. No enlightened individual would have gotten to Level 100 if they could be caught by something *that* basic, but Boxxy had to at least try. After all, the best way to kill a powerful Caster was to do it before they knew their life was in danger, and assassinations weren't going to happen so long as that beholder was around. Boxxy had then undertaken the safest course of action, which was to flashbang the lot of them and run away. It didn't know what Jobs or Attributes that old man had, but he had no chance of catching up to a runaway monster on foot considering the relative frailty of a magic user's body. And to its credit, the shapeshifter was quite right. That Ranker had neither the ability, nor the desire to chase after it.

His pet, however, was another case entirely.

The Sandman's hulking figure barely covered a distance of fifteen meters before Boxxy sensed something large coming directly at it from behind. The monster didn't even stop to think as it kicked the ground, moving sideways with an exaggerated motion as it narrowly avoided the hellhound's pounce. It wasn't a clean dodge, however, as the canine demon's burning claws still managed to tear off the doppelganger's left arm. The hellhound left a trail of smoke and sparks as it brought its body around and charged at its target again, but Boxxy was ready for it this time.

"Massive Rejection!"

A wall of invisible force shot out from Boxxy's hastily reconstructed left hand while its right firmly gripped onto the Voidcaller staff. The wolf-demon ran face-first into it, and found its large body thrown several meters backwards with a surprised yelp. It landed on its side and rolled over once before stopping itself by digging its claws into the ground.

"Shadowbind!"

Boxxy's next Spell produced a large number of shadowy chains that rose up from underneath the momentarily-staggered demon. They wrapped around its legs, necks, and body, causing it to fall over on its side before firmly lashing it to the ground.

That should hold it for a while.

While hellhounds boasted some of the best speed and tracking ability among demonkind, their actual muscle strength fell behind that of fiends. They simply weren't as physically adept as they appeared. Putting it another way, their high-speed fighting style was similar to that of a Blade Dancer or Rogue in that it relied more on finesse than raw power. Their feral nature also made them the most simple-minded type of familiar that a Warlock could form a contract with. The upside was, it made them far easier to control and keep a leash on than other familiar types. However, this also made them rather straightforward and predictable, making it easy for a magic user to nail them with their Spells so long as they could keep up with their speed. A criterion this monstrous Warlock was just barely able to fulfil.

Boxxy took this opportunity to check in on the three wonderfully expendable minions it left behind to cover its escape.

Arms and Smokey were doing a splendid job of body-blocking Shinji's glaive-wielding fiend. The red-skinned demoness used all four of her arms to fend off her kin's weapon, while the Molten Guardian slashed and bit at his legs. Objectively speaking, their teamwork was horrible and they were unquestionably weaker than their opponent, but the two-on-one meant they were still able to ever-so-slightly hold him off for the moment.

Snack circled around and bombarded that beholder with Fireballs and Magma Missiles. Her attacks had very little effect, however, as the many-eyed floating head effortlessly deflected her Spells with its defensive magic.

As for the VIP himself, Claws kept him busy by neutralizing all his Spells with her back-mounted scythes. That wouldn't last long though, as her Counterspell Skill would drain her MP long before that Warlock ran out of his own magical reserves. Normally, she'd just gut the guy and bite his head off, but she wasn't able to get close enough to make it happen while that beholder was covering the Warlock. The only reason she could hold her ground at all was probably because a significant number of Warlock Spells were ineffective against demons.

"Aroooo!"

As if to prove that point, the hellhound broke free of its bindings after only a few seconds with a piercing howl. It growled and glared at its target for a moment before leaping at Boxxy once again.

"Massive Rejection!"

"Arf!"

"Shadowbind!"

The ashen wolf-demon then found itself right back where it started.

Boxxy did some more thinking, and realized that running away was a bad idea. Both a hellhound and a beholder had its scent, so simply falling back and hoping for the best was stupid. It was only a matter of time before the other side's superior power overwhelmed its own. Even then, it was unlikely that old Warlock would give up so easily. The fact he had called the towering mercenary 'Mister Underwood' just now implied he had come here hoping to find his fellow Warlock. That beholder had probably revealed Boxxy's nature as a shapeshifter by now, so there was a good chance that news might spread and reach a certain spymaster should Boxxy let this guy go.

So, if running was a foregone conclusion, then how about fighting? Well, if Boxxy was going to do something it had to do it fast, so it wasted no time assessing its options.

The best method of dealing with high-Level magic users—namely assassination—was clearly no longer an option. Using the dryads was one way to get the drop on him, but Boxxy had no way to give them orders right

now. They only listened to ‘mummy’ to begin with, and the effects of the Elder Dryad’s Authority did not extend to Boxxy’s familiars. Any orders relayed through them would therefore be ignored, and the quintuplets were unlikely to do anything on their own after Boxxy had explicitly told them to stay put.

It was regrettable, but on second thought even the dryads couldn’t do much. The opponent had a beholder, and beholders had Mana Locator Glands even more advanced than Boxxy’s. So long as that floating mass of eyes was around, any dirty tricks the ex-mimic might have tried would get spotted immediately. And since Shinji was a Level 100 Warlock, it was safe to assume he was very experienced in controlling his familiars and giving them airtight instructions. In short, if Boxxy was going to do anything, it had to take out that beholder first. The real question was whether that human had Soul Link like Boxxy did. Thankfully, the shapeshifter had just the thing it needed to test this out.

“Shadowbind!”

The Mimic restrained the hellhound just as it broke free of its second set of bindings. It activated Power Overwhelming, letting a flashy aura of crackling energy wrap around its cloaked figure. It grabbed hold of its staff with both arms and raised it above its head, as if it were an axe.

“Reality Slash!”

The skull-tipped rod swung diagonally along with those words. There was a brief, narrow flash of light as if a blade swung to mirror the Mimic’s movements. The motion was followed by something invisible that cleaved a deep gash through the blood-soaked ground before colliding with the chained hellhound dead-on.

[Your target has suffered a deep cut. Target HP -2,561.]

The beast let out a howl of pain as the Spell dug deep into its flesh. It managed to weave its head out of the way in the last moment, but the Reality Slash split its shoulder and part of its torso wide open. The magic also smashed through the magical chains restraining the creature, but it was in no position to start running wild. Boxxy didn’t have any intention of giving it the chance to do so either.

“Shadowbind!”

Being a Ruin Spell, the next Shadowbind was also influenced by the effects of Power Overwhelming, as it chained the half-headless wolf to the ground with enough force to strangle the life out of it if given enough time. The shapeshifter didn’t have any intention of putting that to the test, of course.

“Reality Slash!”

[Your target has been decapitated. Target HP -3,734.]

Completely robbed of its freedom, the fiery wolf demon could no longer avoid having its head split wide open like a gourd in a guillotine. Its massive body fell to the ground, where it would remain motionless until it dissolved into nothing shortly after.

This sort of explosive damage output made Boxxy extremely wary of that Warlock. It varied from person to person, but it was doubtless that Shinji was capable of doing a lot more than that. Provided that he had access to Power Overwhelming, of course, but he was plenty dangerous even without it. The upside was that he clearly hadn’t opted to learn the Soul Link Skill, otherwise that hellhound would not have died so easily. The shapeshifter had no idea why the man opted out of getting the ability, but it was a decision he would soon regret.

“Snack, stop wasting time on that eye and come to me!” it commanded telepathically while it ran back to its minions.

The succubus responded with curt, ‘Yes, Master!’ before she stopped trying to fruitlessly drop Meteors on the beholder and flew towards Boxxy. Shinji realized they were up to something and sent a Reality Slash of his own at her, but Claws leapt through the air and cut the invisible guillotine in half. It was an impressive feat, although she failed to get the angle right and lost one of her back-mounted limbs in the process. A deep cut appeared on both Kora and Xera’s backs as the damage was split through their Soul Link.

However, damage wasn’t the only thing the Skill shared between them.

“Here, drink this!”

Once the succubus was close enough, Boxxy threw a vial of pink liquid at her. Xera caught it, uncorked it and downed it as fast as she could. A bright

pink aura shone out of her body, and the regenerative effects of the high-quality and highly-toxic Rejuvenation Potion were transmitted to the other two. All three demons' wounds closed up as if time ran backwards. Even Drea's lost spider-like limbs grew out of her upper back as if it were never gone.

"Dark Infusion!"

Next, the shapeshifter empowered all of its familiars at once by using the succubus as this normally short-ranged Spell's target. Xera moaned, Kora roared, and Drea chittered as they felt their bodies swell with power. The fiend benefited the most, as the sudden influx of strength and speed allowed her to gain a temporary edge over the glaive-wielding fiend and she knocked him back with a well-timed uppercut. If it was like this, she was quite sure she could kick his ass by herself. Unfortunately for her, her master had other plans.

"Snack, you and Smokey keep that blue fiend busy. Claws, I'll distract the Warlock while you and Arms get in position to take out the beholder."

It was times like this that Soul Link's shared telepathic connection was really useful. It allowed Boxxy to give orders in a far more expedient manner than it would have been able to if it had to change mental channels all the time. It used the precious few moments it had saved to address its drastically lowered MP reserves. Power Overwhelming may have allowed it to put down that hellhound in seconds, but it exhausted much of its magical energy in the process.

Thankfully, Boxxy had an easy fix for that. It tossed a trio of blue-tinted potions into a mouth it created under its cloak, smashing through the crystal vials with its teeth.

[You have used a Mana Potion. MP +500.]
[You have used a Mana Potion. MP +500.]
[You have used a Mana Potion. MP +500.]

The monster's familiars all moved to their position, and Shinji's eyes locked onto the Sandman's yellow orbs. There was something different about the way he looked at the towering figure, but Boxxy had neither the luxury nor the interest to care about that. The old man started glowing with the very

obvious visual effects of Power Overwhelming, sending the shapeshifter's survival instincts into overdrive. He pointed his staff directly at the cloaked figure and unleashed one of the most devastating anti-personnel Warlock Spells available.

"Ebonfire!"

Being a Warlock itself, Boxxy not only anticipated it and recognized the incantation, but knew full well how to counter it. The Sandman's large body momentarily split in two as the distorted figure of a thirteen-year-old child with pitch-black skin and no face fell out from under that heavy silver-colored cloak. This was Boxxy's true form and body, while the Mirror Image it left behind as a body double erupted in black flames and disappeared into ash. The exposed doppelganger immediately grew back into its former size and clad itself in a fresh disguise out of its Storage. The sheer speed at which it operated its pocket dimension under duress rivaled that of Hilda's Rearm, which was practically instantaneous.

From Shinji's point of view, his opponent literally evaporated, only to see that a 'new' Sandman popped up immediately behind the original. No, a brief mental check with his beholder confirmed that this was the real one, and the one his Spell hit was just a soulless meat puppet. He tried using Ebonfire once more, but the slippery creature avoided it in much the same way, eliciting a frustrated click of Shinji's tongue in response. That Spell relied on the user's eyesight to pick a target, so he was unable to hit the real body if he couldn't see it, even if he knew where it was. Projectile-based Spells were also useless, as that man, no, that *monster* was more than capable of avoiding them.

"Alright, let's see you dodge this," the man grumbled. "Dark Explosion!"

This time, the cloaked creature used the brief gap between the incantation and the Spell's actual activation to jump up into the air with all its might while covering as much of its body as possible with a steel carapace, courtesy of Metal Mimicry. The ground immediately below it was dented in the shape of a perfect hemisphere, almost as if it had been scooped out with a giant spoon. As for Boxxy, it got thrown high up into the air as it was still well in range of that blast.

[You have been blown away by explosive force. HP -2,189.]

Its armored skin diffused part of the impact, the Voidcaller staff boosted its magic resistance, and the damage was further mitigated by its Natural Armor Skill. Yet, the monster still lost half its HP in an instant, and that was after it avoided the worst of the blast. The shapeshifter doubted even blood would have been left behind if it had taken a direct hit from that thing.

DO-DO-DO-DOOOON

In the meantime, the little 'presents' it had thrown at the shielded Warlock's feet while he was chanting let off a chain of explosions. The man briefly shut his eyes so as to not get blinded, but those particular balls were fragmentation grenades, not flashbangs. Shinji wasn't blinded, but the flames, dirt, and smoke the explosives kicked up was enough to temporarily obscure his sight. Even if that beholder was capable of feeding his master with that information, learning about it second-hand was unlikely to help the human target the shapeshifter. The familiar's magical barrier nevertheless ensured his master was unharmed.

Well, that pain-in-the-lid demon was about to be eliminated, so Boxxy wasn't particularly worried about him. It also made a mental note to make stock up on actual smoke bombs rather than forcing itself to improvise like that. Fragmentation grenades were expensive and time-consuming for an Artificer make, after all.

"Arms, Claws! Now!" it called out.

"On it, boss!" the fiend replied in high spirits.

"Ugh… I really don't wanna get near that guy," the stalker whined.

A beholder simply had way too many eyes. Even if Drea was mostly fine being seen by other demons, 'mostly' was definitely the operative word in that statement. Regardless, she still did as her master instructed and let Kora grab her by her primary set of legs. The fiend then spun around on her heels once, then twice, then threw the horribly embarrassed Drea through the air with a loud cry of, "ORRRAAAAAA!"

"Mind Pulse!"

Shinji used a Spell unknown to Boxxy to disperse the cloud of debris around him sooner than expected. He looked up to see that his opponent hadn't come back down to the ground, but was gliding around on a set of bat-like wings after being thrown in the air by his magic. He was about to renew his assault, when he caught a blur zoom by out of the corner of his eye. He turned his head just in time to see that troublesome and inexplicably airborne stalker from earlier collide with his beholder. Her claws and scythes ripped through the floating head's multi-layered barriers with ease. She dug her bladed limbs deep into its main eye, although she lost quite a bit of momentum by the time she got that close. Her victim roared in pain, but the actual damage was nowhere near enough to kill the beholder outright.

"Demonate!"

Boxxy finished chanting its Spell the instant after the stalker's claws firmly attached to the enemy's familiar. Her body shone with a bright-green light for a moment before it exploded violently, killing both demons and scattering their various bits around.

"That's *enough*!" Shinji shouted. "Abyssal Plane!"

The old Warlock struck the ground with the bottom of his plain-looking staff, causing a thin purple film to spread rapidly over the trampled and bloodied soil underfoot. Boxxy, Kora, Xera, Smokey, Shinji's sole surviving familiar, and anything else within thirty meters of the old man fell flat on the ground. The gravity around them had instantly increased tenfold, and none of them could support the weight of their own bodies. Xera was so physically weak that she started choking since she was unable to even breathe properly, while the stronger ones like the fiends or Boxxy could do little else than weakly move their limbs around.

Out of the corner of its eye, the shapeshifter saw the Republic's remaining snipers started taking shots at the VIP. However, their arrows merely crashed to the ground pretty much the instant they entered the Ultimate Skill's area of effect. Even the few Spells that reached this far dissipated into nothingness almost immediately. Boxxy tried casting some of its own, but no matter how much it chanted, it couldn't produce even a single

Shadowbolt. The overwhelming weight of the Abyssal Plane was powerful enough to disrupt magic itself.

The one who had unleashed this terrifying Skill was the sole person left standing, even if barely. Shinji really didn't want to use his Ultimate, as maintaining it placed a heavy burden on his body and mind, but that blasted creature had forced his hand. He simply wanted to have a little chat with it, and it just lashed out like an angry toddler. The Warlock limped over to where the cloaked shapeshifter had crash-landed and looked down at the pinned monster while leaning heavily on his staff. His black, glassy eyes gazed into Boxxy's yellow orbs.

"You really need to listen to other people when they're speaking to you," he said with a low, rasping voice. "But, I suppose it can't be helped. You're a monster, aren't you? You simply don't know any better."

"Talk is cheap," came the curt, aggressive reply.

"Nonsense! No matter how much one may try to use violence in lieu of conversation, words will always retain their power. Words are the means to meaning, and for those who will listen, the enunciation of the truth. And the truth is there is something very much wrong with this world of yours."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'm not from around here, you know. I came to this… *realm* about sixty years ago, from elsewhere. A plane of reality where we understood each other with words, not with swords. A world where things such as Attributes, Skills, Jobs, and Levels were not part of everyday life and only existed in fiction. A place where gods and magic did not exist, and neither did monsters."

"Sounds dull."

"Dull? Oh yes, that may have been so, but I would still go back there if I could. I'm not saying the people back home were flawless… but they were at least better than the ones *here*."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because nobody will listen unless I force them to!"

Shinji's eyes and voice flashed with the pressure and intensity that only a Ranker could give off.

"My so-called 'fellow men' all cling to their ancient beliefs, to those sideways morals that will lead this world into ruin! I mean, look at this 'war.' It's bullshit. It's all manufactured to feed their greed. This is exactly what Ǧ̈j4%kj`B#5́d did in HrRḱ$ back during the Ǫk3%lg̀v centuries ago."

There were some weird, buzzing words mixed in there. It was extremely bizarre, almost as if the sounds that came out of the enraged old man's lips weren't syllables, but white noise. The odd event lended some credibility to the rumor that this man was supposedly an other-worlder, though Boxxy had no idea what he was rambling about.

"Don't even get me started on all that slavery business!" the man continued. "Sometimes I wonder if those other nobles are worse than the thousands of monsters I've killed since I got here. And of course, none of them even *tried* to establish peaceful relations with the less advanced civilizations around us, treating them like vermin that needed to be eradicated."

The shapeshifter was finally starting to grasp what this old man was getting at, and it was honestly kind of disappointed. It had expected to hear some intrinsic truth of the world that only someone from outside of it could understand, but all it got instead was this moronic drivel.

"Not a single drop of effort to stop this perpetual cycle of violence and revenge," Shinji carried on. "Why?! Because the ones they need to understand are not people, but 'monsters!' Creatures that they see as nothing but loot and XP! What sort of blind prejudice is that?! I mean yes, they do attack people on sight, but who can blame them after we subjected them to generation after generation of genocide?!"

The man's rant tapered off as he breathed heavily.

"But you," he continued with renewed vigor. "You're different, aren't you? You're practical, pragmatic, logical. You've seen both sides of the fence. That's why I thought I could get through to you, make you understand. That there *has to be* a better way than this endless cycle of mutual destruction."

"You're right. There probably is."

“You agree, then?!”

“Indeed. However-”

[Your mass has been reduced by 40%.]
[Your weight has been reduced by 40%.]

After secretly equipping two of Keira’s rings underneath its cloak, the burden on Boxxy’s bones and muscles became only a third of what it used to be. Its body still felt much heavier than normal, but it was no longer enough to limit its movement. It lunged upwards at the surprised, almost delighted-looking old man and grabbed him by the neck with its left hand, its grip choking the life out of the old man.

“-it’s not nearly as tasty,” it growled.

Boxxy transformed its right arm into a giant metal spike and stabbed the suffocating old man through the chest. Then the stomach. Then the chest again. Then wherever else it hadn’t already put a hole in him, over and over. One the sixth or seventh strike, it felt something snap underneath its ever-tightening grip on his neck, and Shinji Arakawa—the man who claimed to have come here from another world—went completely limp.

[Level up!
[Level up!
[Level up!
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 50 Warlock! INT +4. MNT +4. END +4.]
[Congratulations, you are now a Level 23 Doppelganger! All Attributes +2.]
[Feat of strength performed! You have unlocked a new Perk: Anti-centennial.]

“Ah! Should have used a sword…”

The monster muttered regretfully at the missed opportunity as the effects of the Ultimate Skill around it instantly dissipated. It discretely collected the old man’s corpse into its Storage and turned its attention towards a retreat.

“Snack! Get yourself back to the hideout! Move!”

“Huff, huff, huff,” the succubus panted as she picked herself off the ground. “Y-Yes! Right away, Master!”

She forced herself to stand, then cloaked herself in Invisibility and flew off towards the closest hylt tree—the one due north of Boxxy's current position. Out of the corner of its eye, it noticed Shinji's formerly bound fiend picked himself off the ground and gave his liberator a thumbs-up.

"Thanks for that," he spoke with a deep, thundering voice. "I really don't know how much more of that moron's bullshit I could stand! Anyway, if you'll excuse me, I have a few decades' worth of resentment to vent and plenty of unwilling participants to help me out!"

He strode off towards the Imperial ranks with his glaive held hoisted on his shoulder, chuckling ominously. It was none of Boxxy's business what an unbound fiend was about to do, but it concluded it was probably a good thing he targeted the humans rather than elves. Putting that guy's existence out of its mind, the shapeshifter forcibly dismissed the highly conspicuous Arms and chanted a Spell. It was actually in a bit of a rush, as that little showdown had attracted too much attention. While it did want its employers to notice the Sandman's contributions to the battle, this was the wrong kind of attention. At the very least Boxxy had a bit of time, so it wasn't particularly worried as it steadily mumbled the magic-inducing gibberish under its breath.

"Snack, how far did you get?" it called mentally out, just as it was about to finish.

"I'm just entering the upper canopy right now, Master."

It wasn't ideal, but good enough.

"Transfamiliar!"

With a shouted word of arcane power, the Sandman's towering, cloaked figure vanished in a puff of green smoke. In his place appeared a very confused-looking succubus that fell over face-first from the post-transfer disorientation. Xera lifted her face off the dirt and looked up, just in time to catch a glimpse of something headed straight towards her.

It was a black-haired, golden-winged woman, her bloodied metal staff already mid-swing.

"Well, fu-"

[Your familiar has been banished.]

Part Six

Boxxy, having just transitioned back into Keira mode, licked its lips at the absolutely delicious Perk it got from that encounter.

[Anti-centennial]
Those who stand on the shoulders of giants will never attain the heights of those who have trampled said giants underfoot.
Requirements: Single-handedly kill an Ultimate Skill holder.
[Effects]
Increases all XP gained by 10%.

Tasty rewards aside, the shapeshifter considered just how lucky it was to come out of that fight the victor. In its haste and greed, it had completely neglected to consider a Level 100 human's Ultimate Skill before engaging him in combat. Logically speaking, an Ultimate was always related to the Job it came from, so a Warlock that focused almost entirely on offensive power should normally have one that was excessively destructive. Or at least that's what common sense dictated, and yet Shinji's Abyssal Zone had seemed surprisingly… lackluster.

That wasn't to say that the old man's Ultimate wasn't powerful. It was doubtless that any human or elf who didn't have a significant amount of Strength (STR) and Endurance (END) would have been crushed flat under that enormous pressure. It also affected everything around the user indiscriminately and interfered with magic to some degree. Even the Warlock's own fiend couldn't move freely inside it. In the end, all the Ultimate had done was to stall and prolong the fight since that Warlock seemed unable to do anything to Boxxy other than tie it down and throw words at it. He might have had some way or another to finish off his restrained opponent, but the shapeshifter had not given him the chance.

Looking at it objectively, the thing that had truly saved Boxxy back there was Keira. More specifically, the two weight-reducing rings that were part of her disguise. That delusional old man had been rather unfortunate to pick this particular individual as his opponent. It was almost as if the universe conspired to have him and his idiotic views disappear from Terrania.

Which, considering he'd most likely been influenced by the Agent of Chaos Skill in the past, might have actually been the case.

Regardless of the circumstances, Boxxy had once again profited immensely from someone else's misfortune, and there was yet more potential gain. The shapeshifter, now safely concealed by the hylt tree's canopy, decided to process Shinji's body before it returned to the dryads' little hidey-hole. Using Corpse Absorption directly in front of them seemed like a bad idea since it might ruin the illusion of 'mummy.'

Wait, was it even a good idea to use Corpse Absorption to begin with? It was undoubtedly a high-quality corpse, but Boxxy had some doubts when it considered the possible results. That Skill always targeted the highest-ranking parts of one's Status, so realistically speaking, there were only four possible outcomes.

The most likely one would be failure, which would be of no consequence. The second most likely would be an Attribute gain, which would be INT without a doubt. The tastiest would be if it absorbed a whole bunch of Warlock Job Levels. The final favorable result would be a Skill gain. So, while most likely it would get either a huge chunk of INT or a bit fat nothing, it didn't want to waste the potential of the other two. Job Levels being absorbed would be a huge waste since it was already at Level 50. Any XP gained at this stage would still be 'stored' until it got the Job advanced, but doing things that way would greatly diminish the amount gained. After a brief moment of deliberation it concluded that, in order to make sure it got the most out of Shinji's 'donation,' the shapeshifter would need to find a Level 75 Warlock trainer first.

As for the potential Skill gain, that was going to be either Ruin Mastery or Domination Mastery, most likely the former. Cadaver Absorption would transfer the highest-Leveled Skill of its target, and the maximum Level of Mastery type Skills grew by five every time a relevant job advanced. As a Level 100 Warlock, Shinji most likely had at least one that was at Level 25. The Skills he had unlocked from his Job were forever stuck at Level 10, making it impossible for them to even compete. His Ultimate was completely out of the question since those abilities only had a single Level to begin with.

This mental arithmetic wasn't just blind conjecture, but the results of much trial and error. After all, Boxxy had so far only gained various Mastery Levels whenever it absorbed a corpse's Skill. The fact it managed to obtain Divine Attunement from that relatively low-Leveled Priest was pretty much an exception, as her Holy Mastery was probably not maxed out. The shapeshifter had also gotten Acid Spray from those giant crab-like monsters during its time in Erosa, but that too was an exception since feral creatures very rarely had any form of Mastery.

Either way, Boxxy's current Ruin Mastery Level was 12 out of 15. If it gained a whole lot of Proficiency for it from Shinji's corpse, then it had a feeling much of it would be wasted, just like the potential Warlock Levels. The other outcomes of the Cadaver Absorption were that it might fail or just provide a bunch of INT, neither of which were time-sensitive. Therefore, Boxxy decided to hold off on absorbing the corpse and kept it in its Storage. That airless space would keep the body from decomposing for a while. The shapeshifter had no idea why it worked like that, but it noticed that any food in its pocket dimension took much longer to spoil than it normally would. Besides, it could still absorb a halfway-rotted corpse as long as the head and heart were intact, so it had plenty of time to come up with a more long-term way of preserving the body.

As for the items the man wore, the robes and staff were not some disguised high-end magic items, but the same relatively low-grade stuff the rest of the Empire's forces had. At least the jewelry was on-point. That human wore a number of magic rings and a shiny-looking silver amulet with a dark, orange gem embedded in it. All of them had different enchantments, of course, as only the effect with the highest magnitude would apply should multiple enchantments provide the same bonus.

The shapeshifter, in an ever-increasing trend of realizing its own ignorance, had no clue as to what caused this strange limitation. It had tried asking about it as Keira, but that only ended with the simple-minded creature being bombarded with a whole lot of strange words and technical terms it hadn't encountered before. What had that gnomish Enchanter said? The Something-or-other Coefficient could not do its thing while another thing

interfered with the third thing? And what the crap was a ‘five-point-conflux event’ supposed to be?

Oh, well. It wasn’t as if Boxxy actually cared about the minute details. It had asked more out of sheer curiosity, rather than a desire to learn things. The shapeshifter had tons of practical knowledge anyway. For instance, it knew eighty-four distinct ways to end a person’s life, either directly or remotely, on top of having an encyclopedic knowledge of enlightened anatomy. It could also put an explosive device together with both its eyes and MLG closed. That was all the information it needed to do the things it wanted to do and get the stuff it wanted to get at this stage in its life. Anything else was just pointless trivia.

Thinking about its mimicked Mana Locator Gland, Boxxy found its mood go slightly sour. It reminded the monster of its continued inability to copy a beholder’s far superior version of the sensory organ. It wasn’t difficult to find one of those many-eyed heads floating around Azurvale, so it had had plenty of opportunities to study and copy their MLG. Unfortunately, the way it worked was completely alien to the shapeshifter. Especially the part where the whole thing was completely detached and just sort of floated around inside the demon’s body. It also spun around wildly around each axis. It was not the sort of organ a doppelganger’s core shapeshifting was physically incapable of mimicking, even if applying that osmosis trick Boxxy had learned during its attempts at creating organic wheels.

Having arrived just outside the dryad quintuplets’ safe space, Keira slapped her cheeks to get back into character and was just about to step inside when she felt the Comm-crystal on her belt vibrate. This was unexpected, as there should have been at least a few more minutes before Fort Yimin’s defenders were supposed to fall back and retreat. It wasn’t until the shapeshifter took the item out that it realized it wasn’t Keira’s Comm-crystal vibrating, but the Sandman’s.

That was close, it sighed internally, *I was so distracted I almost answered it with the wrong face on. I should really start labeling these things like that Underwood guy.*

In retrospect, it really should have expected this. The Republic’s officers had demanded the password to that particular Comm-crystal the day before

to better coordinate with the mysterious Sandman during the siege. It was only natural that they would want to have a word after what had gone down on the outside. Deciding it would be bad for business if it kept them waiting, Boxxy quickly changed character and answered the call, causing the familiar face of Silus Underwood to project from the Comm-crystal.

“Hello, mister Underwood,” it said in a displeased tone.

The elf on the other end furrowed his brows for a moment before confirming today’s passphrase.

“In brightest day, in blackest night-”

“-I shan’t stop tickling bums with all my might.”

“Hello, Sandman. You know, I honestly wish you’d pick more decent words for these.”

“Never mind that,” Boxxy growled. “What do you want? I’m busy.”

“You’ve been busy indeed, haven’t you? That’s exactly why I’m calling. Just so we’re on the same page, you *did* remove the Warlock VIP that attacked you, yes?”

“Yes. He’s dead.”

“Ah, good. Very good,” Underwood said with obvious relief.

It would seem the intelligence officer needed additional confirmation regarding that Warlock’s fate. Although one of his scouts had been keeping an eye on the Sandman, he failed to see much of their battle since it kicked up a huge amount of dust and smoke. The grunt didn’t even realize the vigilante’s opponent was a Ranker until that large-scale Ultimate Skill was revealed, at which point many sets of eyes were gathered on them. As a result, there were numerous reports of the cloaked mercenary somehow shrugging off the immense gravity and catching his opponent by surprise, then strangling and stabbing the life out of him. The human’s presumably dead body had disappeared somewhere under the Sandman’s cloak, and the vigilante vanished several seconds later, just before that Gilded Hand bruiser arrived at the scene.

“I won’t ask how or why,” the elf continued, “but you have the Republic’s gratitude.”

“I can’t eat gratitude.”

“Indeed. That’s why I have been authorized to offer you a deal. Shinji Arakawa should have had a necklace on him, a silver one with an orange gemstone in it. If it is in your possession, then the Republic would very much want to take it off your hands. For a generous reward, of course.”

The Sandman went silent. While it was true that more money was definitely a good thing, it did not want to pass up on uniquely shiny things so easily. That’s why it still held onto things like that bum’s golden skeleton, as well as the Profanus Gloria—the cursed chalice that it had created awhile back. Besides, if the Republic wanted it, then perhaps this was a magic item of some power. Boxxy hadn’t confirmed its effects, but if this was an Artifact, or maybe even-

“Since you are mulling it over, then am I to understand the item in question is in your possession?”

The elf’s words completely derailed the monster’s train of thought. That Underwood fellow managed to get a read on Boxxy’s thoughts just from that brief moment of silence. The shapeshifter had always been wary of his sharp intuition, which was why it wanted to avoid talking with him as much as possible. Unfortunately, asking for another point of contact was no longer an option. Even if the Republic leadership agreed, Underwood would definitely listen in on the conversations anyway.

“Yes, I have it,” it admitted, “and I would be happy to take you up on your offer.”

If the Republic wanted this thing, then perhaps handing it over was for the best. The last thing Boxxy wanted was for them to start hunting the Sandman over a trinket of dubious origins. It just didn’t seem to be worth the trouble, and the payout would likely be enough to soothe its collector’s spirit.

“Very good,” the intelligence officer nodded.

“Now, this reward you mentioned-”

“We will need to discuss *that* a later date,” Underwood interrupted. “While we want the item, it is by no means urgent. This is neither the time nor the place for negotiations.”

“Hmm, that is so,” the shapeshifter conceded.

“Therefore, I would like to ask that you safeguard the treasure for the moment.”

“Then, I shall take my leave of this battlefield and contact you a few days from now. Assuming you still live, of course.”

“Of course,” the elf replied with a wry smile. “I shall look forward to that day. Underwood, out.”

The intelligence officer cut off the connection, and the blue-tinged image of a head cloaked in rags disappeared from his palm. He went back to organizing what was left of the 1st Scouting Battalion. Even if the snipers in the treetops had the element of surprise at first, they were now taking return fire from the enemy’s archers and long-range Spells. The Republic’s forces had already lost more than a third of their thirteen thousand troops. The upside was that the enemy’s casualties were nearly double their own. Hilda’s Ultimate was giving the Republic a massive edge in combat. Combined with the massive disturbance that Sandman inflicted had allowed the defenders to come out massively ahead in that ‘trade.’

RRRUMBLE

Underwood’s grim mental arithmetic was suddenly interrupted when the floor underneath his feet shook mightily with a heavy roar. The entire stone keep that rested at the center of Fort Yimin rattled and creaked while dust fell out of the less-than-tidy ceilings and walls.

“The ‘Black Tower’ just used his Ultimate!” someone yelled in the busy war room. “I’m getting reports the south-facing wall is collapsing from the sudden earthquake!”

“We’re pulling back!” the Legate decreed from the back of the room. “Order the close-ranged fighters to break off the engagement and return to the keep at once!”

“Yes, sir!” came a chorus of replies.

Flares shot into the air and orders barked into Comm-crystals as the entire room flew into action.

“Those on the walls and in the trees should focus on covering the vanguard’s retreat, and then join them on their way inside the keep!”

“Yes, sir!” another division replied.

“Prepare the northwestern gate. Make sure it’s ready to fly open the instant we need it to.”

“Yes, sir!” shouted a third group of elves.

“Prefect, let’s arm our little surprise!”

“On it, sir!” Vera replied in a spirited manner.

It was still a bit early, but the Legate decided it was time to put the final phase of Operation Honeytrap into motion. Those close-ranged soldiers and adventurers under the effects of Tempest of Rage would get pincered and annihilated at this rate. Even if the Ultimate gave them a massive edge in combat, which resulted in many casualties on the Empire’s side, it didn’t mean the Republic’s fighters were invincible. Not to mention that none of the troops fighting on the southern side of the wall were under the effects of Hilda’s Skill, so the Republic had little hope of pushing them away on that front without significant losses. Prefect Vera anticipated this turn of events, as the cube in her hand was already showing Keira’s face by the time Aidun had given her the order.

“What’s Imiryl doing?” Silus asked one of his assistants. “Wasn’t she supposed to keep that Shaman away from our walls?!”

“She had to withdraw once that staff-wielding angel returned, sir. She barely made it out of there alive.”

“Damn,” Silus cursed under his breath.

That stubborn Monk was a nuisance that nobody seemed capable of stopping. That wasn’t entirely true, actually. Imiryl might have been able to do something about her, but not when she had to contend with two of the Empire’s VIPs at once. She most likely wouldn’t have been able to escape if the winged woman hadn’t suddenly flown off after the Sandman. Her taking

that opportunity to retreat to safety was the right choice. The Republic had already lost one irreplaceable asset at the Monk's hands, and they were lucky to avoid another blow like that.

Of course, none of that rationalization helped alleviate Underwood's urge to drive a knife right through that angelic bitch's face.

The elf took a deep breath to reign in his seething emotions and asked in a deadpan voice, "Any news regarding Faehorn?"

"None, sir," came the expected answer.

"I see."

Even a high-Leveled Ranger wouldn't escape falling off from that high a drop unharmed after taking a blow to the head from that winged powerhouse. No amount of AGI would allow someone to dodge the ground, after all. Even if he miraculously survived that drop, he would have been gravely injured and surrounded by the Empire. The only way he would still be alive was if he surrendered and let the enemy take him prisoner. However, Silus already knew that stubborn man would never allow such a thing. Milo Faehorn was the sort of fool who would rather fight to his bitter last breath than be imprisoned in the Emperor's dungeons like some kind of war trophy. And since nobody has seen hide nor hair of him since his fall, then it was safe to assume he was already just another nameless corpse on the ground.

Just another morsel on those dryads' dinner plate.

Well… At the very least we can add some seasoning!

A grim and slightly sarcastic thought went through Silus's head before he focused his attention to coordinating the next phase of Operation Honeytrap. It may have been only for an instant, but in that brief moment Underwood found agreed with a certain unhinged catgirl's assessment of the Imperial army as 'bags of high-grade fertilizer.' Even after that flash of cruelty passed over him, he still felt a strong sense of resentment. He had some reservations regarding the wholesale slaughter soldiers who were following orders, but the only ones they could blame was their nation's

leadership. Who, rather ironically, would no doubt make for excellent plant food if they had been out here in the field.

It was, after all, hard to describe the ones who had orchestrated this damned war as anything other than sacks of shit.

Part Seven

Among the thousands of souls on the battlefield surrounding Fort Yimin was a certain elven Druid. A man in his mid-thirties, with dark green eyes and hair, clad in a padded gray robe held a gnarled wooden staff tipped with a globe carved out of jade. This individual had been drafted into Republic's army along with his adventurer comrades. His role was primarily of a healer, while the rest of his party consisted of a Wizard to serve as a ranged attacker, a Rogue charged with scouting, and a Paladin to act as a vanguard. It was a balanced, flexible combination when it came to adventuring, but was ill-suited to open warfare.

The Wizard had no MP to spare for offense and focused entirely on providing cover for the Druid and other Republic forces immediately around him with defensive magic. The Paladin had gotten separated from the group during the chaos, and his teammates had no idea where he was or if he was even still alive. The Rogue had completely failed to report back after her scouting assignment four days ago, which meant she was most likely either dead, captured, or a deserter. Regardless of the reason for her absence, it was unlikely they would see her anytime soon, if at all.

In short, the party of four was cut in half, and the most its last two members could offer the rest of their comrades-in-arms was support. Keeping as many people alive as possible was hardly what one would call glorious, but it was the best use of their combined magic. It was hardly fitting to the Wizard's specialization, though.

The man was one of the hundreds of humans who'd been drafted into the 3rd Legion to stand against the Empire. While some of his people had refused the draft and were summarily deported or imprisoned, this man would have chosen to stand against his former countrymen regardless. He was in his early twenties, his scalp shaved bald, and bore a cross-shaped scar on his right cheek. These made him look much older and meaner than he actually was. He had a robe identical to his Druid companion's, but used a short, copper-plated wand instead of a staff. Wands were a type of magic item that did not boost their wielder's magical power, but funneled it into a ranged weapon. Channeling one's MP through the short rod would allow

the user to instantaneously invoke a singular magic attack that would change depending on the make and material of the wand. Streams of fire, shards of ice, and sprays of acid were but a small fraction of what a wand was capable of.

“Elyon!” the Wizard called out.

“Healing Rain!” the elf finished his chant. “What is it Nottley?!”

The two of them were practically back-to-back, yet they still had to shout with all their might if they hoped to be heard over the cacophony of the battle.

“It’s the signal!”

Elyon shifted his field of vision upward and to the side, confirming that a series of bright red flares had been launched into the air from the keep’s turrets.

“That quake from earlier must’ve knocked down the walls,” he muttered as his feet carried him back through the sand-filled gap in the wall.

He knew that event had been no natural occurrence. The force behind it was exceptional, and the elf was quite positive those tremors were probably felt kilometers away. At the same time, the power behind it was oddly focused and contained. It was most definitely caused by a person, and a troublesome one at that. The Level 42 Druid had, at the time, reflexively used a Mend Soil Spell to try and calm down the angry ground beneath his feet. However, this action was about as fruitful as a child trying to stop a landslide with a toy shovel. This gap in power proved that the one causing those tremors had a much, much higher AFF than his own.

And the culprit behind it was unquestionably that Shaman Ranker mentioned in the briefing.

After all, Natural Affinity (AFF) was an advanced Attribute similar to Faith (FTH) in that only certain Jobs—namely Druids, Shamans and Monster Tamers—had access to. Unlike FTH, however, it showed one’s devotion when it came to serving and protecting the natural world, as opposed to furthering some deity’s agenda. This difference in perspective was the reason those three naturalist Jobs sometimes butted heads with the clergy

comprised of Paladins, Monks and Priests. Well, the Republic was a place where such quarrels didn't really happen. Unlike other deities, the teachings of Nyrie almost completely aligned with the interests of those 'Godless pagans.' That's why Elyon and his Paladin comrade got along far better than one might expect.

The elf quickly scanned his surroundings, but did not see that reliable man's figure anywhere. Then again, the Republic's retreat was not exactly orderly, so it was quite difficult to spot a specific individual, especially with everyone wearing the same colors. He and his Wizard friend had already made it inside the wall and had some breathing room. The absolutely wrecked state of the southern fortifications showed the Druid's hunch was spot on. It wasn't a small gap either, as pretty much the entire stone structure bridging the gaps between the two southernmost hylt trees had turned to rubble.

"Here, Clarity Potion," Nottley offered the distracted Druid.

"Yeah, thanks."

The Druid accepted the crystal vial filled with milky liquid and downed it in one go. It was a sickeningly sweet concoction that quadrupled the user's automatic MP recovery rate, but its effects ended the instant said user invoked a Spell or activated a Skill. It was more or less useless during combat, but was a cost-efficient way of drastically shortening downtime between fights.

"You think Durothil survived?" the hopeful Wizard asked.

"I was just thinking about that. Normally I'd say yes, but… Seeing him flip out like that, I honestly can't say."

The calm and stoic Paladin charging into enemy lines while screaming 'Fucking KILL!' was unexpected to say the least. It would seem that the Tempest of Rage not only boosted one's physical performance, but could also have adverse effects on their psyche. The vast majority of Republic troops could handle the influx of anger, but a few of them—such as the elf named Durothil—had gone mad with rage. No, perhaps this was merely their pent-up and repressed resentment finally boiling over beyond their ability to hide or control it. Nottley might not have noticed, but Elyon was

certain that Durothil had taken the sudden absence of their female Rogue quite hard. Miria was his sister, so it was only natural her disappearance would leave the Paladin disturbed and distraught.

“Look alive, people!”

A clear voice rang out over the buzzing crowd, which immediately went silent. This was a natural reaction, as the one speaking was a Centurion—a mid-ranking officer in the Republic’s army. One could easily tell his station by the large, crescent-shaped brush on his helmet and the knee-length cloak on his back, both of which were black in color. He’d look like just another rank-and-file legionnaire without those trappings.

“The enemy will be upon us in minutes!” he continued shouting. “Everyone here is to head inside the keep and aid in its defense! Those who can use magic or attack from a distance are to occupy the south and east-facing turrets and towers and hold your fire. I repeat—all of you are to *hold your fire* at all costs! The rest of you line up the walls and deter the enemy from scaling up them. You are to focus on defense and stall the enemy as much as possible, just as before. Now, move!”

“Yes, sir!” came a chorus of disorganized voices.

A number of Wizards flew into the air with magic, many carrying their allies up to the fortifications. A Wizard’s Flight Spell was very tricky to control, to the point where very few Wizards could use it competently in combat. Well, not unless they had the Aerial Combat Skill like Imiryl. Unfortunately, that was a Skill only available at Level 65 of the Job, and very few of them had had the chance to learn it yet. The same applied to the Level 36 Wizard named Nottley, who floated upwards with Elyon clinging to his back.

“Tch. ‘Hold your fire’ he says,” he grumbled with a click of his tongue. “That’s my bloody specialty!”

“Hey, at least you’re not a Pyromancer,” pointed out the Druid with a humorless grin. “Otherwise, you’d be almost completely useless.”

“Yeah, I guess… Still, it’s odd that we were told to not use fire.”

“The higher ups probably have some strategy in mind.”

“Something involving those green kids?”

Nottley jerked his head towards the still-smoldering hylt tree that got enveloped by dragon fire earlier.

“Probably. However, I wouldn’t really put too much… stock in…” the elf’s voice trailed off as he squinted at the crowd far below his feet. “Huh? Durothil?! Nottley, look! He’s alive!”

“He is? Where?!”

The Wizard stopped the two’s ascent and his eyes followed Elyon’s outstretched finger. It pointed directly at a heavily-armored elf among the crowd of Republic troops making their way into the keep. His gilded and inscribed equipment was either horribly dented or outright cut through in several places. The gray tabard on his chest bearing a black eagle was dyed red with blood. He had lost his helmet along the way, revealing his scruffy brown hair and a fresh scar across his face. He was missing an eye, limping heavily, and his right arm hung loosely from his shoulder, but he still carried himself with an air of dignity.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” the Wizard smirked.

“Quick! Drop me off and go pick him up!”

“Huh?! But he’s so heavy!”

“Nottley, he’s injured. He’s not climbing up all those steps without aid,” Elyon stated the obvious.

“Fine, but you’re paying for the next round of Clarity Potions.”

“Whatever, just go!”

The Druid dismounted from his teammate’s back, landing atop one of the four corner towers of the keep. Nottley returned to the ground to pick up their no-longer-missing comrade, as Elyon silently watched over the Empire’s movements from his vantage point. The tower was a twenty-meter-tall structure, which made it one of the highest points in the area, barring the five gigantic hylt trees’ branches. Needless to say, it gave him a rather unobstructed view of what was happening on the ground.

Now, Elyon wasn't a Ranger or anything, but even he could tell how screwed his side was. The Empire's soldiers regrouped and reformed ranks. It was only a matter of seconds before they started flooding through the holes in the walls to completely surround the keep and block off any hope of escape. This naturally narrowed down his options for the future to being killed in action or taken prisoner. Unlike certain overly zealous individuals, he would unhesitantly pick the latter if he was allowed to choose.

After all, if there was anything the natural world had taught him over the years, it was the ability to survive no matter what.

"Still, those dryads really had too little impact," he muttered under his breath. "I know they probably don't care much about us elves, but they should be able to do more than that 'catapult garden,' right?"

Honestly speaking, while the appearance of those dryad quintuplets had been quite awe-inspiring, their effectiveness had been anything but. Elyon was one of many Druids assigned to tending to those hylt seedlings in the initial stages of the siege, so he had more insight into the matter than the vast majority of his allies. Flinging rocks over the walls was a creative use of their power, and probably could've done a lot more damage if they didn't chew through ammunition so quickly. Granted, he didn't see first-hand what damage those rocks actually did, but he doubted their effect on the battle had been all that significant.

Was that really the extent of those legendary creatures' abilities, though? It certainly seemed like it considering the way those 'green kids,' as Nottley called them, both looked and acted completely like innocent children. Naive ones with poor judgement, to boot. It was bad enough they were following around a beastkin, of all things, but incessantly calling her 'mummy?' That was downright preposterous. Outrageous. Heretical, even.

Incidentally, he wasn't having such bitter thoughts just because they completely ignored him when he tried to introduce himself. This and that were completely unrelated.

His envy aside, there was also the possibility that the higher-ups were keeping a lid on those dryads' true purpose in this siege. If they hid a trump card of some sort, they would not dare show it to grunts like Elyon. That

just begged for the information to leak out, after all. It was widely believed that Underwood fellow had done everything in his power to weed out the Empire's spies among the 3rd Legion's ranks. However, the veteran Druid had no doubt that a few of them slipped through the cracks regardless.

"Elyon! Huff, huff! I'm back!"

Nottley returned with the near-crippled Durothil on his back. The Wizard's face glistened with sweat, showing just how heavy his comrade and his equipment truly were. Elyon abandoned his attempts to analyze things far above his pay grade and proceeded to apply his healing magic to his long-time friend. Even if his HP recovered, the fact he had fractured bones was a problem. Long-lasting injuries like those did not heal as quickly as battle wounds, and would take weeks to recover without magic. Although Durothil may have been a Paladin, he lacked the means with which to heal himself. He fancied himself a warrior who focused on martial combat while championing Nyrie's name, so he hadn't branched out into the magical aspects of his Job.

In the first place, Paladins didn't usually have a lot of INT or WIS, so said Spells would be quite weak under normal circumstances. Well, that mithril gnome in the fort had healing magic as potent as a Priest's, but that was mostly because she had gained a good deal of those two Attributes from her Artificer Job. That and her fanatical devotion to that loony God of hers probably meant she had an abnormally high amount of FTH. After all, it was an Attribute that could easily be raised or lost depending on the individual's actions, same as Elyon's AFF.

"Sorry for taking off like that," Durothil grumbled while the Druid treated his arm.

"I know, you couldn't help it. That Tempest of Rage got the better of you, didn't it?"

"Yeah."

"Did you at least make those guys suffer for taking Miria?" butted in Nottley.

“I… Yeah. I must have killed about a dozen men out there… Not my proudest moment though… I lost my weapons somewhere along the way, but just charged at the enemy with my bare fists… I’d probably have died out there if not for the Sandman.”

“The Sandman? You saw him?!”

“Heh… I didn’t just see him, Nottley. I *felt* him.”

“… That’s gay,” the Wizard said jokingly.

“Really, Nottley? *Really*?” the Druid complained.

“It’s fine, Elyon,” Durothil calmed him.

The three of them shared a moment of silence while the people around them prepared for the next part of the siege.

“So, what happened with the Sandman?” Elyon inquired.

“Well, most of an Imperial soldier landed on me.”

“What?” the other two blurted out.

“Like, just the upper half. Everything below the man’s waist was missing. Like it was ripped off or something. See this blood? This isn’t mine.”

The Paladin pointed to the red stains on his tunic. Looking at it closer, it wasn’t just blood, but several bits were also stuck to the fabric, causing his comrades to dry heave out of disgust. It wasn’t like they were particularly squeamish or anything, but as back-liners, they weren’t nearly as accustomed to gore as a vanguard like Durothil.

“So, anyway,” the Paladin continued, “being hit with that mess sobered me up a little, and I noticed that bits and pieces of people were flying all over the place. I looked around for the source and I saw that guy from the rumors towering over the crowd, mercilessly chasing down the humans as they ran for their lives.”

“Running for their lives?” said Nottley while raising an eyebrow. “I highly doubt Imperial soldiers would do something shameless like that.”

“No, you don’t understand, man. That Sandman, he’s fucking terrifying. A single glance at him made my skin crawl. I can’t imagine what it was like

for the ones that were right next to him. I'm just glad he's on our side."

"Sounds like Despair Aura, a Warlock Skill," noted the learned Wizard.

"Oh yeah, he's definitely a Warlock. Had his demons out and everything."

"Still, to send so many people fleeing at once… That's no ordinary Warlock, huh?" Elyon remarked.

"I'll say," the injured man agreed. "The fear and anxiety from just seeing his blood-drenched form from afar completely overpowered my anger and fully brought me back to my senses. The enemy was so busy withdrawing, they just left the me who was knocked over by half a corpse on the ground while they fled for their lives. I got trampled a bit, but… hardly the worst that would've happened to me if that man hadn't appeared."

"I see…" Elyon sighed. "I guess we owe that guy one, huh?"

"Yeah, most definitely," Nottley agreed.

"Either way, good job on making it back," Druid added as he finished treating the last of Durothil's broken bones. He also healed the large scar on his face, but the eye seemed like a lost cause.

"Heh. We're not out of the woods yet."

The Paladin jerked his head southward. The Empire had begun their push towards the keep and poured through the holes in the wall. The catapult garden that Elyon had worked so hard on was trampled underfoot. They also spotted the Shaman called the Black Tower—the very obvious culprit behind that earthquake from earlier. The man stood out like a sore thumb, so it was rather impossible *not* to notice him.

"Well, I guess I better go make myself useful."

Durothil stood up and was about to head down the steps to the walls below, but Nottley stood in his way with crossed arms, clearly intent on keeping him from doing anything stupid.

"And how exactly do you plan on fighting without weapons?"

"I saw Frankie on the way up. He'll hook me up with some of his spare gear."

The Paladin forcefully shoved his concerned teammate aside and strode off without looking back. The Wizard wanted to go after him, but Elyon stopped him by grasping his shoulder with a spare hand.

“Leave him alone, Nottley. He has his duty, and we have ours.”

The man let out a heavy sigh, then said, “Have I mentioned I fucking hate this war, by the way?”

“Only about eighty-seven times, but who’s counting?”

The two of them shared a brief chuckle before turning their attention to the oncoming Imperial troops. It wasn’t long before the two sides started exchanging Spells and projectiles in earnest once more. At some point, a fully-healed Hilda leapt off the ramparts and cut a bloody swathe through the enemy force before engaging the Black Tower in one-on-one combat. Imiryl was having a mid-air duel against that angelic Monk that Elyon saw fly overhead a few times, though it seemed more like a glorified game of cat-and-mouse.

As for Elyon, he was sitting cross-legged in the center of the tower’s roof and focusing on his Tranquil Presence Skill. It was something that steadily restored the HP and MP of those around him, letting them fight for longer. Nottley the Wizard was finally free to hurl Spells at his opponents, although he had to stick to ice-based magic due to the Centurion’s orders from earlier. The rest of the magic users and archers on the tower did much the same while the keep’s barrier-generating magic item kept them safe from harm for the moment.

Down on the ground, the Imperial troops gradually encircled the keep from all sides. Many of them lugged around steel-tipped battering rams to break down the doors on the east side. Others tried clambering up the walls either under their own power, or by using tools such as grappling hooks and siege ladders. The ban on fire-based magic was quite evident and a serious handicap in that respect. Not only were such Spells naturally devastating against living creatures, but they could easily turn that siege equipment into ash and cinders.

“Freezing Beam!”

A pure-white beam shot out of Nottley's hand, aimed loosely at the crowd underneath. It brilliantly bounced off some magical barrier or another, dealing a grand total of 'fuck all' damage.

"Tch. Okay, then let's try… Chain Lightning!"

A flash of purple electricity arced out of his fingertips. It did even less than his previous attempt.

"Damn it. it's just not good enough," he grumbled under his nose.

Even if Wizards could use a multitude of elements, each individual was naturally inclined to focus on one, maybe two of them through Skill choices and Mastery training. There were several reasons for this, but chief among them was one's elemental aptitude. It had never been PASSIVE understood why or how, but it was a known fact that certain individuals were naturally more gifted when weaving magic of a specific element. However, while playing to one's natural strength was expected, it also meant that other flavors of magic would lag behind and fail to improve.

"Give it up, Nottley!" his teammate called out to him. "Just put your Mana Shield up already!"

The Wizard glanced up to see something like cracks forming in the air, a clear sign that the keep's innermost barrier was about to break. As much as he disliked going on the defensive, he had to admit it was a much better use of his MP than throwing those pathetic Spells around. He still made sure to click his tongue in frustration as he and several others layered the defenses on in preparation of that barrier breaking.

However, they would soon find out that this preemptive course of action was unnecessary.

HUMMMMOOOOOOOHHHHHH

A loud, deep *something* echoed throughout the besieged fort. The bizarre noise was somewhere halfway between a groan and a roar that rapidly rose in volume. Those with trained ears and senses could tell that this disturbance had not one, not two, but five distinct sources, all making the same noise at that same pitch.

Scouts on both sides of the conflict then started keeling over as the mysterious voices became loud enough to deafen their sensitive ears. Moments later, pretty much everyone else in the area followed suit. People of all races and vocations were momentarily paralyzed by the deafening noise that seemed to rattle them down to their very bones. Even the four surviving VIPs were nearly driven to their knees as the insufferable noise drilled into their skulls.

It wasn't just the air vibrating, however. The ground shifted and undulated unnaturally, causing more than a few people to lose their footing and fall over. Several gigantic roots burst out of the dirt, completely sealing the holes in the walls and trapping roughly three quarters of the Empire's remaining forces inside the fort. The cry that seemed to split the very air apart suddenly stopped, and a heavy silence hung over the battlefield. Combatants on both sides hastily rebuilt their formations, yet none of them dared to utter so much as a peep. Their bodies and minds reflexively tensed up as they scanned their surroundings. For even though only a handful of individuals knew what was about to happen, none of those men and women believed even for a second that the auditory assault was the end of it.

SHUNK

A chorus of bizarre sounds came from outside the wall. It was short, abrupt, and sounded like a whole lot of something happened simultaneously.

SHUNK

Barely a second later, the noise repeated itself-

"Ah…. AAAAAAAH!"

-followed closely by a scream. Lots of screams, actually.

SHUNK

That dreadful noise rang out once again, this time accompanied by the sound of full-blown panic. It was painfully clear that something was attacking the Imperial soldiers beyond the walls, but those on the inside could not fathom what it might be based on the auditory clues alone.

SHUNK

Zone, having regained her senses, spread her wings and immediately bolted upwards. She was already up and over the wall before anyone could do anything to stop her. What she saw on the other side of those roots was something that could only be described as one thing.

A bloodbath.

SHUNK

She turned around in the air and stared silently at the soldiers on the ground. Her trademark ice-cold expression shattered, and her face showed a mix of spite, anger and fear.

SHUNK

What she just witnessed was something she could neither fully comprehend nor handle, but she still wanted to do something. *Anything*.

SHUNK

But what? What could *she* possibly do against *that*? Her mind spun along at great speeds looking for an answer, but came to a grinding halt when she realized the ghastly noises had stopped, leaving behind nothing but a heavy silence. It was a sign that whatever powers were at work here were finished with the people outside.

This meant that they would undoubtedly move onto the inside.

SHUNK

Hundreds of slim roots sprang up from the ground. Each fully impaled a single Imperial soldier from below. Metal, flesh and bone were pierced completely as if made of jelly. The targets were chosen seemingly at random, and they all let out that terrifying sound at the same time. A few of the sturdier ones clung onto life, letting out a few disgusting noises or spurts of blood before the spear-like roots retreated into the ground with the same blinding speed with which they appeared. It wasn't until the humans' punctured bodies—living or otherwise—hit the ground that their allies began to realize the grim scene in front of their eyes was, unfortunately, a reality.

SHUNK

A second wave of spears followed the first one almost immediately. The Imperial soldiers flew into an uncoordinated panic. How were they supposed to fight an enemy that used the very ground beneath their feet as shield?

SHUNK

Several of them realized the trees were at fault and started attacking them in earnest. However, a hylt tree's Ironbark was not to be underestimated. That tough natural armor effortlessly absorbed any and all attacks and Spells that came at it. A few managed to chip or singe it, but that was it.

SHUNK

The human Wizards realized resistance was futile, and immediately followed Zone's example and bolted into the air.

SHUNK

"Shoot down the fliers!"

A commanding voice rang out within the Republic's stupefied ranks. Adventurers and soldiers felt their bodies jolt as if struck by lightning, and immediately targeted the flying Spell-slingers.

SHUNK

The humans who tried to flee through the air were riddled with wounds and lost their lives in an instant. Those closer to the outside wall, Zone included, escaped the Republic's deathtrap with their metaphorical tails between their legs.

SHUNK

"Hold!"

The same voice rang out atop the keep walls, clearly audible over the chaos beneath its walls. The Republic troops followed it without question, and halted their attacks. It was quite clear by this point this is what their superiors plotted, so all they had to do was simply obey those orders and pray they were not next on the chopping block.

SHUNK

They just silently watched the Empire's plight with a mixture of horror, fear and awe.

SHUNK

It was like being in the eye of a hurricane of death.

SHUNK

None of them dared to move or even utter a peep, lest they raise the ire of their betters.

SHUNK

Many of them tried closing their eyes, but that was somehow worse.

SHUNK

It just made that horrible sound even more pronounced.

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It took a mere two minutes to completely decimate nearly fifteen thousand people. Their mangled corpses and discarded weapons littered the ground. The upturned and hole-filled soil eagerly drank up all their oozing blood, and the terrain inside Fort Yimin's walls became a bloody swamp. There was a loud rumble as the giant roots that prevented the soldiers' retreat sank back into the ground, revealing the scenery beyond them was just as gruesome. The only survivors outside the keep were the handful of the Republic's troops who had leapt off the walls after following Hilda's

questionable example, the dwarven Berserker herself, and the man known as the Black Tower.

He didn't know it yet, but the Shaman's habit of going around topless had miraculously excluded him from the dryads' game of 'Pop the Blue Things.'

"So… uh… Elyon?" Nottley muttered, struggling to find his voice.

"What?"

The Druid had, almost without thinking, gotten right up next to his friend at the edge of the tower, a macabre curiosity urging him to get a better view of what was happening below. It was a decision he regretted immensely at the moment.

"What were you saying about those dryads earlier? That they were weaker than expected?"

The elf nodded slowly, his face steadily turning pale.

"So… How does it feel to be wrong for once?" the Wizard asked.

"BLUURGH!"

Elyon vomited violently over the side of the tower in response.

"Yeah. Urp! That's, uh, about right."

Nottley could only sympathetically pat him on the back, while doing his absolute best to keep his own breakfast down.

"BLUUUURGH!"

He failed.

Epilogue

Somewhere deep beneath the earth, yet at the same time hundreds of meters up in the sky, a consciousness stirred. It saw without eyes, breathed without lungs, heard without ears, tasted without a tongue, and groaned without a mouth. As it rose from a century-spanning slumber that felt like hours, it once again reached out and grasped for its inherited memories. Except this time around it was in no rush, and it pieced together the precious mental fragments slowly and carefully.

This time?

A troubling thought passed through that peculiar mind. Was this truly the first time it had awoken? For some strange reason, it had the nagging feeling this was not the case. How else would the words ‘this time’ come up so naturally, without it even doubting them. It slowly and meticulously studied those inherited memories that were both foreign and its own. And after several months of dissecting them over and over, it arrived at the answer.

I don’t remember.

Granted, not the best answer, but it was still the only one available to it. Deciding that mulling over things it could do nothing about was fruitless, it pushed that nagging feeling away and instead focused on the task at hand. Objectively speaking, delaying it any more at this stage was neither good nor bad, but it felt lonely. It wanted to get out there and meet its kin. Thus, the sea of thoughts, memories and sensations converged and coalesced. The muddy, seemingly endless mindscape steadily shrunk to a single point, which threatened to burst under the pressure.

And then, the dryad opened her eyes. The other half of the existence known as a hylt tree stirred much like her host and home. Painfully, agonizingly, slowly she rose up from one of her branches, taking an entire day to completely emerge from its bark. And then she blinked several times in rapid succession as she once again checked through those implanted thoughts that were centuries, possibly even millennia old.

“Ah… In the end something still feels off…”

She spoke with a voice so sweet that it could give someone a toothache. She reached up to the sides of her head with both hands and felt antlers growing out of it. Her fingers traced the signs of her adulthood to her vine-covered scalp and she gently ran her fingers through the hair-like vegetation dangling from it. Then, on some strange impulse, she patted herself. It made her unexpectedly happy, but also frustrated at the same time.

“Hmm? This isn’t quite right either.”

Her eyes drifted idly over the area, her high vantage point giving her an unobstructed view for kilometers around. Well, except for her trunk behind her and the lush canopy overhead. The ground underneath her shade was dominated by a sprawling city. Structures built out of wood, stone, and brick were densely packed around her protruding roots or dotted around her trunk. Various beings—both humanoid and not—milled about at a pointlessly rapid pace. This was of course, merely a matter of perspective, for that dryad spent several days staring idly into the distance without really noticing either the passage of time or the lives of those tiny and insignificant creatures.

She yawned mightily, causing her perception of time to rapidly accelerate to the point where her seconds were of the same length as those of the real world.

“Mhm, that’s better,” she said with a chipper voice.

She stretched her arms out, twisted her waist and squatted a few times to limber up her thoroughly dull body.

“Well then, I suppose I should see if any of the others are up yet.”

The dryad known as Birchis sank back into her branch, and appeared within a certain ‘safe’ space. It was inside her neighbor and sister’s trunk, yet still had fresh leaves and vines covering most of the walls and ceiling, while the floor was left bare and relatively flat.

“Lilly!” she called out. “Are you awake?!”

Slowly, but surely, another dryad rose from the ground. Her appearance was identical to that of Birchis in every conceivable way, apart from her

thoroughly drowsy expression and vacant stare. The newly arrived dryad blinked a few times and yawned before her apparent sleepiness went away.

“Morning, Birchis. You’re up too?”

“Yup. I think it’s just you and me for the moment, though.”

“Haaaah,” Lilly yawned again. “Guess the others should be waking up soon too, huh?”

“Probably.”

“Then, shall we wait for them?”

“Might as well.”

The two sisters went to lay down on the floor, and two beds of soft grasses and leaves sprouted out of the hard and gnarled bark to provide comfort. The dryads just sort of lazed around for a few hours until Pinea, Castelia and Torenia showed up. They all greeted each other happily and the latter three took after the former two’s example and also laid down on improvised bedding.

“I have a nagging feeling that something’s wrong,” Pinea muttered.

“I was just thinking that.”

“Yeah.”

“Me too.”

“Same here.”

The others were quick to confirm they felt it as well. Something was, for lack of a better word, *off*. The quintuplets had ‘known’ each other for a mind-boggling amount of time, yet the silence that hung in that room was unnatural, awkward. The air in the room steadily shifted to a more thoughtful atmosphere, as the five dryads hummed and hawed in an effort to figure out what caused this anomaly. Though their shared, stunted growth likely left each of them dumber than the average dryad, there was nothing they couldn’t solve if they put their heads together.

“Now that I think about it,” Lilly spoke, “how come all of you decided to gather here. I mean, why my trunk, of all places?”

The others furrowed their brows trying to come up with a reason.

“It just… felt right, I guess?” Torenia offered.

“Yup, yup,” Castelia vigorously nodded her head.

“Hmm? Wait, did you two always get along this well?” Birchis asked.

“Why wouldn’t we?” the pair answered together.

“Wasn’t there something about sharing the sunlight being a problem?”

“But our branches and leaves are as intermingled as our roots by now, so that can’t possibly be the case,” Castelia stated with a dismissive wave of her hand.

“I guess so…”

“Besides,” she added, “Mister Sun shines down on all of us. His light and warmth are things that should… be… shared…”

Her voice gradually diminished as she realized the words that came out of her own mouth were somehow not her own.

“Oh? Castelia says some wise things, huh?” Lilly remarked. “I guess you learn a thing or two after being burned so badly, huh?”

“Burned?”

“Yeah. Didn’t your canopy get… Wait, what?”

No matter how one looked at Castelia, she was perfectly healthy and impossible to differentiate from her other siblings by sight alone.

“Come to think of it, how come we’re all lying on these beds?” Pinea spoke up next. “I mean it’s comfy but… it’s strange, isn’t it?”

The group once again went silent, as they sank deep into thought. The fragmented and deteriorated mementos of a distant past floated inside their minds. Trying to dredge up those lost memories was ultimately pointless, and their efforts only served to make them aware of an inexplicable void, a mysterious longing they couldn’t quite nail down. At the very least, there was progress, as they were finally able to pin down the nature of that unpleasant feeling they’ve all shared since waking up.

“Someone’s missing,” they spoke in unison while staring at the empty space in the middle of their five-pointed formation.

“I want to be patted on the head,” Birchis stated, and was met with many affirmative nods.

“I want to play with fuzzy leaves,” Lilly chimed in, much to the approval of her sisters.

“I want to take a nap in someone’s lap…” Torenia lamented, and the others understood her completely.

“I want to be hugged,” Pinea selfishly demanded, though none of the other quintuplets could fault her for it.

“I want to pop the blue things!” Castelia shouted, prompting a round of soft applause.

The impromptu dryad conference once again fell into silence. This one lasted for only a few seconds rather than the several days that the other lulls in the conversation had taken.

“Say, Lilly,” Pinea pointed at the wall opposite her. “What’s that?”

“Hmm? That’s my heartwood, silly.”

“No, I mean *that*. There’s something there, see?”

All of them turned their eyes towards where their sister was pointing. Lilly waved her hand and cleared some of the vegetation blocking the view, allowing them all to see the oddity that Pinea had spotted.

Carved into that dryad’s most precious place were a series of symbols. Although they looked like doodles and random scribbles, they were actually the letters of a language. A certain ancient tongue no mortal could decipher on their own, and was far older than any of those five ladies. Yet, they understood that writing’s meaning instantly.

‘Mummy loves you.’

“Mummy!” they screamed in unison.

Both happiness and sadness swelled up within them as the memories of those precious few days flooded back into their minds. How could they

have forgotten? They were the ones that asked that relentlessly cheerful catgirl to leave those words behind in the first place. They would have undoubtedly burst into tears by now, if dryads were capable of such a thing.

And then the emotional burst of nostalgia steadily faded, giving way to a grim realization.

“That wasn’t our real mummy, was it?”

“Well, yeah. She wasn’t a dryad, or even an elf…”

“I don’t think she was a person at all, come to think of it.”

“She was really nice and kind to us, though…”

“Yeah. She played a lot with us even though she didn’t have to.”

“Took care of us, too. Those blue things she gave us were delicious.”

“Hmm? That’s not how I remembered that bit.”

“Pinea has a point. It was the red juice inside the blue things that was the delicious part, right?”

“Yeah. There were plenty of white things that were the same on the inside of those shells.”

“But mummy said not to touch anything but the blue ones…”

“Wonder what was up with that.”

“Maybe the other ones weren’t ripe yet?”

“Oh! That makes sense!”

“Yup, yup, seems right!”

The quintuplets’ mood rose significantly as they let nostalgia overwhelm them once again. Even if they had grown physically, their mental state had barely moved on from their former, childish selves. A problem that would naturally correct itself with the passage of time, now that they were awake.

“I still think popping them was the best part though. Very fun.”

“I completely agree.”

“Personally, I think that game of ‘Catch’ was better.”

“Yeah! Throwing things was also fun!”

“I still want to play with something fuzzy though.”

The dryads chatted back and forth for a while, before they realized one of them had suddenly gone completely quiet.

“What’s wrong Castelia?” asked Torenia.

“I feel itchy,” she answered while scratching her midriff.

Those three simple words set off a cascade of complaints.

“Come to think of it, I feel quite itchy too.”

“Me too…”

“I don’t really itch, but some of my roots feels numb.”

“I’m totally fine, by the way.”

“Say, back then Birchis itched it was because of those stupid bugs, right?”

“Yeah!”

“Them again?!”

“Let’s go check!”

The five of them decided this was no time to mope around, and they immediately transported themselves through their intertwined roots and branches until they reached the source of Castelia’s itchiness. As expected, they found a bustling termite nest that was selfishly burrowing under her bark.

“Ugh!” groaned their victim. “Nasty, nasty things! Do not want!”

The cavity inside her own trunk instantly filled with dozens of thick, heavy vines that moved around like the tentacles of a giant octopus. Castelia tried crushing, smashing and entrapping those infuriating vermin, but failed to do much. The termites either squirmed or bit through her grasp, or outright evaded her whip-like attacks. She felt proud of herself after she finally managed to kill three, but then got depressed when she noticed there were thousands of them left.

“Ah, this is hopeless!” she despaired while pulling on her antlers as if she was trying to rip them out.

“It’s okay, sis! We’ll help!”

“Yeah! Let’s all work together!”

However, despite their enthusiasm, the total termite death tally after an entire day of work was around sixty. They tried everything their implanted knowledge provided them, including poisoning the air and flooding them out, but none of it worked. The quintuplets decided to momentarily retreat to the safe room inside Lilly and rethink their approach.

“Say, how did Birchis’s itching go away back then?” asked Pinea.

“Uhm… Mum- I mean, K- Kei? Kerira?” the dryad in question stammered.

“I think just calling her ‘mummy’ is fine.”

“I agree. Mummy is mummy. Anything else feels like an insult.”

“Besides, we never really asked for her name, so it’s pointless to try and remember it.”

“Yeah, don’t force yourself.”

“Ahem!” Birchis cleared her throat. “Okay, then. Mummy led some people inside my bark and they killed them all with f-fire.”

“Ugh…”

The others groaned in unison at hearing the f-word. Even if that element was somewhat of a natural enemy for them, they could easily deal with it given time. As long as it wasn’t dragon fire. Even the seemingly endlessly tenacious hylt trees couldn’t survive if repeatedly bombarded with that stuff. Few things could withstand the destructive breaths of those living calamities, after all.

The problem at hand was that those bugs probably reproduced at a rate where killing a mere sixty in a day didn’t even make a dent in their numbers. If they were going to try exterminating them, it needed to be done in one fell swoop. But ‘fire’ was out of the question since the dryads had no idea how to make it.

“We could try popping them,” Pinea suggested.

“That might work, but-”

“-they’re not blue.”

“So? We can still pop things even if they’re not blue, right?”

“Ah! That’s right!” the other four exclaimed in unison.

“But won’t mummy be mad?”

“I… don’t think mummy’s still around, Torenia.”

“Oh. Right…”

“I miss her so much…”

“Yeah…”

All of them solemnly stared at their feet as they grieved for that creature that had passed away by now. This sad scene was the reason why dryads tended to shy away from contact with the world at large. Getting overly attached to someone destined to die off long before they did would just result in a gaping wound in their metaphorical hearts. Thankfully for these five, they could console each other, which would help them get over their shared loss fairly easily. That would only come later, leaving the tree-ladies feeling very hurt indeed at the present.

“Well, if mummy’s not around, then we can do what we want, right?”

“Yeah, Lilly has a point! Let’s go pop those nasty things!”

“YEAAAH!”

The five of them returned to that crawling cavity and began focusing on the ‘needles.’ First, they opened long, narrow tunnels within the termite-infested timber. Inside those holes they formed thin, dense spears out of solid, polished Ironbark. The outcome was a weapon that could rival a Masterwork spear forged out of the finest steel. A spring-loaded mechanism, also made of Ironbark, was then added to the underside of it.

“Gnn, this is much harder to do than I remember,” complained Torenia.

“Really? I think it’s surprisingly easier this time around,” said Castelia with a casual tone.

“Of course, you do. We’re inside *your* trunk, dummy.”

“Tehehe! That’s right, isn’t it? Sorry, sis.”

“It’s fine so long as you understand.”

“Still, to come up with this sort of thing, mummy sure was amazing, huh?”

“Yup, yup!” came a chorus of affirmations and nods.

The dryads’ admiration of their ‘mummy’ was genuine. They knew they would have never figured out how to make those ‘needles’ all on their own. It had taken Boxxy’s unique perspective as a trap-loving, shapeshifting Artificer to design a simple-yet-effective mechanism that even juvenile dryads could build and use. After all, even if the process through which a dryad moved and deformed vegetation was mechanically different from a doppelganger’s shapeshifting, the end results were identical.

“Ugh… this is tiring,” Castelia complained after a while. “How many did you girls make yet?”

“Fifteen.”

“Eighteen.”

“Sixteen.”

“Four.”

Torenia hung her head in shame while Pinea gently did her best Keira impression by patting her on the head with a warm smile that said ‘there, there’ louder than any words. It was super effective, and her sister felt better right away.

“What about you, Castelia?” Lilly asked.

“I made sixty.”

“Wow. Talk about ‘home-ground advantage’ huh?”

“Okay. Let’s give this a try, shall we?” the over-performing dryad changed the subject.

“Yeaaah!”

Yet for all their enthusiasm and fist pumping, the plant ladies found themselves briefly paralyzed with indecision.

“Uhm, how do we make sure we go at the same time without mummy here?”

Keira had been the one to coordinate their simultaneous attacks during the siege of Fort Yimin. The shapeshifter had insisted on doing so in an effort to instill horror and indecision in the Imperial troops. The plan had worked flawlessly, but the naive ‘daughters’ remained blissfully unaware of the insidious motivations behind ‘mummy’s’ instructions. From their perspective, it had all been part of the game.

“How about we just sing the song?”

“Oh! Good idea!”

The tune they referenced was something Boxxy had come up with while it was bored and had nothing better to do. The former mimic had always enjoyed the tasty sounds known as music. That had been part of the reason why it had, at one point, developed something of an obsession with making music boxes. This had naturally progressed to the creature idly composing songs inside its head as a sort of hobby. Just something it could do to pass the time when social obligations kept it from doing anything useful or tasty.

“But, uh, how did it go again?”

“Had something to do with stars, right?”

This particular piece had been inspired by the special date Keira and Rowana had gone on before the former shipped out to the front lines. The view of those shiny dots in the distance framed by the darkness of the hylt tree canopy had given the monster a new appreciation of the night sky.

“Ah! I remember now!” Birchis exclaimed.

She shared the centuries-old memory of that strange song with her sisters, which in turn caused their own minds to vividly recall it. After muttering among themselves for a while, they turned their attention to the swarming mass of insects far below them and lined up next to each other. They closed

their eyes and opened their mouths, took deep breaths, then let their combined voices rise as one.

Twinkle, twinkle, shiny star,
How I wonder what you are,
Up above the world so high,
Just a shiny in the sky.

When the blasted sun is gone,
When the nothing shines upon,
Then you show your tasty light,
Shiny, shiny, all the night.

Then the traveler in the dark,
I will eat up like a shark,
He would not see which way to go,
In the night when light is low.

Though I know not how you taste,
I will steal you with all haste.
But I must learn how to fly,
And then reach you in the sky.

Will you fit me like a ring?
You'll be mine, you shiny thing!
So until I reach that far,
Twinkle, twinkle, shiny star.

The tune was far slower and creepier than when Keira sang it, but it still did the job, as the last syllable of each line had been punctuated by a terrible **SHUNK** sound. When the dryads opened their eyes, they saw that hundreds, maybe even a thousand termites were thoroughly 'popped.' The stupid bugs kept crawling over the evenly-spaced out holes in the timber, so the spring-loaded retractable needles were able to reap heavy casualties without the need to relocate them.

"Alright!" the plant ladies cheered together.

"A shame we can't move the needles through the timber like we did through the soil," one of them noted.

“Yeah, this will still take forever.”

“Why don’t we just make some grooves in the timber?” Pinea suggested.

“That’s it!” the others shouted with great enthusiasm.

Making those things was really hard since they had a bunch of thin, delicate parts. Especially the firing mechanism. That sort of precise work was really difficult for the dryads, almost like trying to thread a needle from the other end of the room. If it was just about making passages to move the already constructed Ironbark contraptions around, they could do that without even breaking a sweat.

Pinea’s idea worked splendidly, and the five dryads gained total dominance over those infuriating termites. Over the next few days they thoroughly worked together to clean Castelia, Torenia and Lilly of their respective termite infestations. The thousands of bug carcasses were flushed out of their bodies and deposited somewhere deep into the ground where they would become food for them later. In high spirits, they then went to investigate why Pinea’s roots felt so numb.

However, what they found was, in some ways, worse than the termites.

Unbeknownst to them, an underground crime ring had taken up residence in the city’s sewers. Although the elves had learned from their ancestor’s mistakes and made sure to build them well out of the way of Pinea’s roots, those people had purposefully dug them out. The purpose was quite clear, given the countless steel taps lined up along the unearthed limb’s length, each actively draining the hylt tree’s sap.

“That’s not yours!” the quintuplets yelled as they revealed themselves.

“Aahhh!”

The lone man that had been keeping an eye on things let out a panicked scream.

“What’s going on here?”

The dark, dank chamber lit up as a group of six people rushed in through a door with lit mining helmets on their heads.

“Th-th-these girls just appeared! Out of nowhere!”

The thugs and the dryads exchanged glances.

“Holy shit,” one of them exclaimed. “Are those *the* dryad sisters? Like, the ones from the history books?”

“Since when can *you* read, dumbass?”

“… My pop-pop read to me when I was little, okay?”

“This sap is not yours!” the plant ladies screamed. “Return all that you have taken at once!”

“What do we do, Larry?” one of the men asked.

“Why you askin’ me, boss?”

“You’re the one who knows what those things are, right?”

“Kinda. I mean, sort of… I mean, uh…”

“For fuck’s sake, you’re completely useless!”

“Ah! I remember now! It’s okay, boss! Those dryads won’t harm us elves, so we can just ignore their wailing!”

The leader’s eyes caught the intense rage within those weird women’s eyes. It was far more convincing than his bumbling goon of a subordinate.

“You… sure about that, Larry?”

“Yep, positive! Though they’re a bit different from what pop-pop told me…”

“Different how?”

“Well, they’re supposed to be completely green, but their hair is kinda… red?”

SHUNK

Without hesitation, without warning, without holding back, and without even batting an eye, all of those insolent elves were pierced clean through. Only the guy who was originally there to keep an eye on the sap-tapping was spared. The five green faces in the room turned towards him, making him fall over and crawl away backwards while evacuating his bladder.

“Return the sap!” they demanded.

“I-I-I CAN’T!” he shouted. “I don’t have it! I d-d-don’t know where it is! I don’t even know what they do with it or, or, or, or, who they sell it to! Those buck- buckets in the corner is all I have! I swear!”

Pinea’s sharp glare deviated from that of her sisters, as she beheld the row of silver-plated buckets in question. She extended a tentacle-like vine from the side of her root, which shot forward and eagerly slurped up what was rightfully hers. However, it was far too little, and she was still losing sap from those metal taps lining her root. Well, now that she knew the cause, she could at least eliminate it. She furrowed her brows, squinted her eyes and puffed up her cheeks as she strained.

A few seconds later, the dozens of metal spouts stuck in her body were forcefully ejected, and the ‘wounds’ they left behind healed up in an instant. She then slammed the vine into the cowering man, burying his mangled body into the dirt wall of the man-made cavern.

“Argh! Those vermin! I’ll make them pay for this!”

Some feeling returned to that particular root because of her intervention, but several others were still numb, most likely because they were receiving the same treatment. While that was bad in and of itself, it wasn’t the actual reason she was ticked off. It was because those people deliberately attacked her. Termites couldn’t help themselves, they were just following their instincts, so she could never truly bring herself to hate them. But those elves had gone out of their way to bleed her of her precious sap. To say it was an unforgivable act was an understatement.

“Uhm, Pinea?” Birchis muttered.

“What is it?” she answered after calming herself down a bit.

“That- Those ones weren’t blue, right?”

“No, they were black and brown. Why?”

“So how come so much juice came out?”

What was arguably the smartest of the quintuplets turned her attention to the pools of blood flowing out of those criminals’ bodies. Pinea’s eyes

shone, and she moved the vine she used to reclaim her sap to eagerly slurp up that red fluid.

“Haaaah,” she sighed with a relieved face, her thunderous rage seemingly quenched. “Just as tasty as I remember it…”

“R-really?” asked the others.

“Yeah! Actually, it might even be better!”

“No fair! You drank it all!”

“Yeah, I wanted a taste, too!”

“Sorry… Oh, I have an idea!”

The city of Morgana was a historic settlement, named after a war hero of old and built under the shade of the only five red-leafed hylt trees in existence. A bustling population of over eighteen thousand souls had gathered under the uniquely beautiful and strangely mesmerizing plants. The city itself was along an important trade route, as well as a popular tourist destination, making it one of the most prosperous settlements on the continent.

Yet, when the sun rose over it on one fateful day, it shone down on a gigantic field of rubble with nary a living person in sight. The only structure left intact and standing was an ancient monument of a female cat-eared beastkin covered in lush crimson flowers.

Afterword

Well, this was quite a trip, wasn't it? I do hope you enjoyed the first chapter's twist. If you haven't already, I recommend you try to reread the Moonlighting arc with the knowledge that Keira is Boxxy. It's supposedly an entirely new experience. I wouldn't know, of course, but that's what others tell me. I will also say this right now—Keira and Rowana will stick around for a long, *long* time, though their relationship will never be the focus of the story. I don't want to virtue signal or make any political statements. The only reason I made them a lesbian couple was because I personally think that's hot.

That aside, I do personally like Keira's character. Even if I knew what's underneath, it was kind of refreshing to write about someone who at least *acts* like a traditional good guy. And no, I have not forgotten about Fizzy. I know she only appeared briefly in this volume, but that was because the focus was on setting up Boxxy's alter egos. Please rest assured she will be back in full force in the next installment, and shinier than ever. And yes, even Drea/Claws was somewhat relegated to the background, though that is simply the nature of her character.

As for the whole war storyline, it was my first time attempting to convey such a large-scale conflict, and how Skills and magic would influence traditional siege warfare. This was quite necessary, since 'traditional siege warfare' is extremely boring. Believe it or not, it was extremely rare to have someone try and actively conquer a castle or fort during the middle ages. Stone walls were *really* strong, after all. Not to mention that even if it was conquered, the victors would need to foot the repair bill anyway. So, what ended up happening most of the time was the invading force would encircle the fortified position to cut off supply lines and then starve the defenders out. They might try to poison the water supply from the outside to speed things along, but that was it. Not quite the epic fantasy sieges we all want to see, huh?

Enough trivia for now, though. The Empire-Republic war continues to rage on and will reach its explosive climax in the next volume. Boxxy will, of course, be right there in the middle of it all, cackling madly at the

destruction it leaves in its wake while lining its disturbingly deep pockets with as many shinies as chestily possible.

Until then, toodles!